A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EVIL

Book 4

Do Wrong Right

A Web Serial By

David Verburg

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Bonus Chapter: Prologue

> "If my allies were half as reliable as my enemies, I would have a different moniker."
>
> King Henry Fairfax, the Landless, upon being told of the Praesi invasion of Principate-occupied Callow

It went against Iason's instincts, but Amelia had been right. She had a knack for these things, it came with her Name. They must keep a low profile, at least for now. The sooner they moved out of Dormer and into the countryside – rumour at the market was that large swaths of the south were still patrolled only irregularly by the Legions – the better, but as long as they stayed in the city they had to be quiet. It'd been most a day now since the three of them had left the river barge they'd stowed away on, and they'd split for the afternoon. Lergo had gone to have a look at what the locals called Summer Hill, the mound of melted stone where they said the Black Queen had tricked the Queen of Summer into returning to Arcadia. The Ashuran had whined like a child about having to abandon his flamboyant crimson clothes for something less attention-grabbing, but he'd given in anyways. And made eyes at Amelia all the while, the pretentious twit. The Red Mage had proved he was a force to reckon with in a fight, but Iason had not grown to like him in the months since their band first assembled. The Gallant Bandit herself had gone to find them accommodations for the night, so he'd been charged with obtaining foodstuffs for the journey ahead.

The marketplace in Dormer was thriving, for a city that'd been emptied and set aflame not even a year ago. It was Callowans running the shops and stalls, but there was a gaggle of foreign merchants as well. Iason found it difficult to tell apart the Taghreb and the men of the Free Cities, for they looked much alike in skin and faces, but the black-skinned Soninke stood out starkly. The hero bargained half-heartedly with a peddler for lentils and dried meat, rather certain he got robbed on the exchange. He was paying with silver *fidi* from Mercantis, one of the few coins no merchant in Calernia refused, and he was not certain how it compared to Imperial coinage. The merchant's smiling admission he had no scale to compare the weights did little to inspire trust,

though the man was unmoved when Iason threatened to seek another peddler. Odd behaviour, from a merchant who could not even afford a stall.

"There," the peddler said, taking pity on him and giving back a few coppers.

Not a mintage he recognized, Iason noted. It could be worthless for all he knew.

"Don't look at me like that, son," the merchant snorted. "That's from the Royal Mint in Marchford, not Harrow trash like everyone else is trying to offload. Call it my kindness of the day."

"Callow has a mint?" Iason said in Lower Miezan, surprised. "I thought it used the Tower's coin."

"The Bastard Lord had one built," the peddler told him approvingly. "That's Taghreb for you. Vicious fuckers one and all, but they've a nose for business. Mind you, everyone still takes Praesi mintage. Have to, with all the gold coming south these days."

"There are a lot of foreigners," the hero agreed, casting a wary look at a nearby Soninke.

The peddler looked amused.

"You don't sound like no Callowan, boy," he said. "Delos?"

"Atalante," he replied. "My father was, anyway. I was raised west."

He'd grown to manhood in the principality of Creusens, but admitting as much in this city would have been the act of a fool.

"We got a lot of Wastelanders around nowadays," the peddler agreed. "Trying to get their hands on grain, you know. Mercantis caught on so the Consortium is gouging them on prices and buying up the reserves in the other cities to drive up the prices. They're used to this country being the greener pasture."

"Few of them are smiling," Iason said, only now noticing.

"That's 'cause the Bastard Lord restricted commerce in foodstuffs," the merchant grinned nastily. "They want more than scraps, they have to get a permit in Laure. The really desperate ones are ruining themselves emptying tavern larders one at a time, but already the court is clamping down on that."

"That seems like a loss of profit for you all," Iason said.

"Worth it, to have the crown's men around when some Wastelanders try to get nasty," the peddler said, spitting to the side. "Not that there's been a lot of those. I'll say this for the Black Queen – since she crucified all those pricks after Second Liesse, Praesi have been stepping *real* light around here."

The hero was almost nauseated. They said the villain ruling Callow had nailed hundreds to crosses after slaying her rival, made them grisly ornaments along the road. The merchant should have been appalled, but if anything he sounded grudgingly approving. Iason had never been skilled at hiding his thoughts – it went against his Name to be less than Stalwart in anything he did – and the peddler picked up on it. The man spat to the side again, looking warier now.

"You with the House of Light, son?" he probed.

"A lay brother," Iason said. "Never took the full vows. I don't have the disposition for it."

Full-fledged brothers had to vow pacifism, and it was in his nature to meet injustice sword in hand.

"Didn't know that was a thing," the peddler said, but he was mollified.

It wasn't, not in Callow anyway. The House of Light in Procer tended to consider its equivalent in Callow to be a very... provincial cousin. Prone to eccentricities. That the Order of the White Hand, true anointed paladins, had been allowed to hold lands of its own in the old days was spoken of as impious back home. It was just history, now that the Order had been exterminated, but Iason had a personal interest in the matter. His Name had but few previous incarnations, and most of them had come to be in Callow. The hero did not linger after that, already uncomfortable with how much attention he'd drawn. He hoisted the sack over his shoulder and made his way to the quarter by the docks, where Amelia had said she'd find them an inn. He was wondering how to find her, when she found him instead. The Gallant Brigand was almost as tall as he was, lithe and graceful in a way he could not help but stare at. Dark hair kept in a ponytail was usually covered by a highwayman's hat, though she'd stashed it away for the sake of discretion, and the notched scar on her cheek somehow only added to her beauty.

"There you are," Amelia smiled. "Fruitful foray?"

Iason cleared his throat uncomfortably. The cloistered life in Aviliers had not taught him how to deal with beautiful women, and he was always on the backfoot around her. At least Lergo wasn't there. The Red Mage always seemed to make it worse with his glib and cutting japes. As if the sorcerer himself didn't hang on her every word.

"I have supplies," Iason stiffly replied. "Have you secured accommodations?"

Amelia snorted and clapped his shoulder.

"Secured accommodations," she repeated teasingly. "You need to loosen up, Iason. Though I suppose that would be against type."

I can be fun, the Stalwart Paladin silently insisted. *Just because I can't set things on fire with a word doesn't mean I'm a bore.* Instead of saying that he ended up chewing on his tongue like a fool, to the woman's visible amusement.

"Come on," she said, withdrawing her hand. "I found us a place. Be warned, though. It was cheap for a reason."

Iason frowned when he first saw the inn, as the warning seemed inaccurate. It was not luxurious palace, but it was spacious and swift perusal of the common room revealed it to be scrupulously clean. Perhaps she'd meant the food would be horrid? It hardly be worse than the cooking they'd inflicted on themselves journeying from the countryside to Atalante after forming their band in Nicae. The Gallant – Iason did not like to think of the other part of her Name, no matter how much he liked her – shot him a toothy grin after he set down the sack, and a moment later a loud screaming match began in the kitchen adjoin-

ing the common room. The hero grimaced. Lergo strolled in an hour later, still looking put-out at wearing wool instead of blindingly red silk, and claimed at seat at the table where Iason had been sharing a drink with Amelia and failing miserably at small talk. The Red Mage stole his tankard and drank from it, wrinkling his nose at the taste. The sorcerer had been born to one of the high tiers of citizenship in Ashur, he was likely used to much better fare. Everything about him smacked of arrogant privilege, which had not become any less grating with time.

"Had a look at that hill," Lergo casually said in tradertalk. "That was a serious scrap. If our cousin up north can tangle that hard, we're in for quite a vigorous dance."

The cousin up north, they'd taken to calling her to be discreet. Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow. The Squire, some said, though others implied she had another Name yet to be revealed. The breadth of the swirl of rumours around the villain that ruled Callow was staggering, for one so young. *Undefeated in battle. She murdered a god to steal his mantle and tricked two others into doom without ever unsheathing her blade. She has more lives than a cat, holds sway over dead and fae alike.* Her cohorts, the Woe, had been revealed to the wider world through the infamous massacre they called the Doom of Liesse back home. The Hierophant, a cold madman whose strange sorceries tamed demons and stilled miracles. The Thief, a fallen heroine said to have once stolen an entire fleet and even snatched the sun out of the sky. The Archer, the greatest pupil of the Lady of the Lake who had never lost in single combat. And the last, Hakram Deadhand. The Adjutant. They said he was unkillable, that he was large as an ogre and his hand of bones could wrest out your soul. The heirs to the Calamities had made a bloody debut, last year. Iason had paid close attention to the rumours, knowing even the slightest hint could make the difference between life and death.

The three of them had come, after all, to kill the Black Queen.

"That might have been the fae, not her," Amelia whispered in the same language, one of the few they all shared. "Her talent is supposed to be ice, not fire."

"And what a talent fire can be," Lergo said, grinning suggestively at the Gallant. "The element of passion, you know."

Iason's teeth clenched.

"We're still on the outskirts," Amelia said. "We'll hear more when we go deeper into the country. The south looks like very promising grounds to begin our work."

They would, to her. The Gallant Brigand had been vague about her activities before joining their band, but Iason had pieced together that she'd made her mark in the wake of the Tyrant of Helike's armies as they sowed chaos across the Free Cities. The southern parts of Callow were still feeling the aftermath of the last three wars, and so she would be moving on somewhat familiar territory. Robbing the powerful to help the powerless was a worthy cause, even

if he disapproved of her methods. Banditry was a sin in the eyes of the Heavens, else why would so many bandit Names be sworn to the Hellgods? They had to delay the conversation after that, for the innkeepers came to offer their service. Callowans both, an old married couple. They offered stew on the house, though the ale was not, and to Iason's mild irritation lingered afterwards to chat with what seemed to be their only current patrons. Some matters were their own explanation.

"Dormer born and raised, the both of us," the old man – Albert, as he insisted on being called – told them proudly. "City's had a rough few years but we'll get back on our feet, you'll see."

"I heard Dormer was part of the Liesse Rebellion," Amelia said smilingly, "but the damage was all from the fae, I am told?"

"Good Anne dragged us into the mess, it's true," the old woman grudgingly admitted. "She cut a deal with the Black Queen after, though, spared us the worse. And she's moved up in the world since, eh? Governess-General. A balm on everyone's soul that."

"Her whelp of a nephew's governor now," Albert said. "He did fine getting people out before Summer came, but too many still died. His aunt he is not."

"That's not on the boy," the old woman sharply said. "That's because a villain is queen. Ma always said that makes you cursed. Just look at the Wasteland."

"Your mother also said a bowl of cream and bread crumbs would keep the fairies happy, Mary," the old man mocked. "How'd *that* go again?"

The three of them sat awkwardly as the old couple argued loudly, Iason deriving some satisfaction form the fact that Lergo looked as uncomfortable as he felt himself.

"I couldn't help but notice the portraits by the kitchen door," Amelia intervened. "You have children?"

Gods they had they been lucky to run into her, Iason thought. And not only because looking at her when they trekked through the countryside made the journey a great deal more pleasant. Neither he nor the Red Mage had a way with people.

"Only the one now," Mary soberly said. "Our youngest died at First Liesse. Them devils summoned by the Diabolist did it."

"Aye, and the Black Queen killed her dead," Albert grunted. "She's a hard one, make no mistake, but these are bad times. Hard is what we need. Even Jehan the Wise hung himself some princes. Seven and one, like in the song."

"It's ungodly is what it is," the old woman barked. "A villain queen? No good will come of it."

"She was crowned by a Sister all proper, Mary," the old man insisted. "What more can you ask?"

"Everyone knows the House up north went tame," she sniffed.

"We've heard a lot about the queen, down south," Iason said. "Some of it was less than pleasant."

"Never said she was a choir girl," Albert defended. "But Hells, it's still better than Procer ain't it? Kingdom's back and Praes is playing nice. If the rest of the world would just leave us alone we'd muddle on just fine."

"He has to say that," Mary told them. "Lily went and joined the army, the fool girl. Taking orders from an orc calling herself marshal of all things."

"If the orc pays her taxes and fights at the border, I say she's welcome here," the old man said stubbornly. "A whole goblin tribe settled at Marchford and that turned out all right. You have to forgive Mary, she's a country girl. I'm a learned man, me. Went to Laure once when I was a boy."

"Not the Laure story again," the old woman sighed.

Lergo spoke up, sparing them the Laure story, and Iason had never before been so close to feeling fondness for the man.

"We intend on travelling north," the Red Mage said. "Are the roads safe?"

"Sure, if-" Albert began, but he paused.

In the distance, bells were ringing. Four times, Iason counted.

"Again?" the old man said.

"Last one went straight to the Blessed Isle, made it far inland after," Mary said. "Guess that was the last of the clever bunch."

"That's thrice now," Albert complained. "Last time it took all day to clean up the docks after. No wonder we never get clients, with all them foreigners mucking up the city."

He paused, the glanced at the three heroes.

"No offence," he assured them.

"None taken," the Gallant Brigand lied. "We're new to town, so I'm at a bit of a loss. What did the bells mean?"

"Oh, you dears don't need to worry," the old woman said. "Just stay indoors, it was the curfew bells. It'll be foggy out soon anyway."

"Curfew?" Iason said. "What for?"

"Heroes," Albert said. "Some must have come. Streets have to be cleared until that's done with."

The Stalwart Paladin's blood ran cold. Already? How could the Empire possibly have known? It hadn't even been a whole day. The three heroes shared a look and excused themselves to their rooms, telling their hosts of travel weariness, and made council in Iason's own.

"We can't stay here," Amelia began. "We can't risk putting those two in the middle of a fight between Named."

"They must have scried us, it's the only explanation," the Red Mage whispered. "That shouldn't be possible, not with the Paladin bearing Heaven's touch. Unless you screwed up, Iason."

"I don't *use* the touch, mage," the Paladin coldly replied. "It is there. Always. There is no intent needed."

"I used to hunt for Helike supply caches, back in the day," the Gallant Brigand said quietly. "Easy work, good loot. The way I'd find them was by watching the roads the Tyrant's men used most, then doubling back."

"I don't follow," Iason admitted.

"That is because you're a sword-waving simpleton," the Red Mage drawled, and the Paladin resisted the urge to punch that twinkle out of his eye. "The touch, it blocks actual scrying but the spell would still register failure. They moment it did they must have known we were coming, and they tracked us with the same. That's impressively clever, I'll admit."

"Then they might be able to track us to here," Amelia urgently said. "We need to move now."

Neither of them argued. Iason left silver by his bed to pay for both the night and the trouble, as his companions grabbed their personal affairs. The Mage took longer, and returned decked in red silks.

"We are trying to be *discreet*," the Paladin hissed, his accent thickening.

"Discreet is over," the man shrugged. "Now is the time for panache."

"Well, I hope you can run in those," the Gallant amusedly said, adjusting her hat. "Out the window, boys."

Heroic work, Iason thought, involved a lot more jumping down windowsills than he'd anticipated. He'd not needed to change, as he'd never taken off the chain mail under his coat and rarely wore a helmet. The Heavens provided armour when he required it. He landed as silently as a man wearing over twenty pounds of steel could, which was not very. The Gallant landed smoothly as a cat, and the Red Mage nearly broke his ankle landing. The Paladin smothered a smile, as it was unkind to take enjoyment from the misfortune of others. However richly deserved.

"Well," Amelia said, lowering the brim of her hat. "There's that fog Mary was talking about."

It'd been late afternoon and the winters in southern Callow were mild this late in the year – spring would not come for months yet but there was no snow in sight – which made the sudden appearance of thick fog rather jarring. There was nothing natural about this.

"Might I suggest we leave the city before a full legion comes after us?" Lergo suggested drily. "Blood doesn't show on these robes but it *does* smell."

"Keep an eye out," Iason said, for the first since he'd come ashore back in his element. "As an opening move, this only makes sense if only our vision is restricted."

Otherwise the enemy was simply helping them escape. As the moved quietly through the streets, the Paladin wondered how many of the Woe would have come. The full five? That might be more than they could handle. Two or three, he was confident they could deal with. Four they could flee. Five with a sorcerer as reportedly powerful as the Hierophant among them would be too many. Best that they never encounter the enemy at all, and disappear into the countryside where they would be harder to track. Amelia suddenly stopped.

"We're being watched," the Gallant Brigand said.

He did not question her: she has an aspect relating to this, though he knew not the word. Iason could see no one so he sharpened his hearing. Scuttling above, on the rooftops.

"Goblin," he said, and unsheathed his longsword. "Roof to the left."

The Gallant followed suit with her sabre and the Red Mage fell behind them. Eyes watching above, Iason saw a leering green face pop out from thatching. Yellow eyes shone bright in the fog, above a grin of needle-like fangs.

"Don't you think it was a little racist to assume I was a goblin?" the creature mused. "Plenty of people use rooftops, you know. They're like streets that make it easier to murder."

The Stalwart Paladin blinked, then opened his mouth. Had he – but the goblin had just said... He closed his mouth.

"You're quite brave, to seek out three heroes on your own," the Red Mage said.

"Well, we don't live old as a rule," the greenskin said. "But hey, that's why there's a *lot* of us."

Iason's hearing was still sharpened and that was why he heard them move. Not one but dozens, and they'd all struck at once. He'd expected crossbows but instead what came tumbling down was balls of clay with lit fuses, and without missing a beat he called on the protection of the Heavens. A halo of light wreathed him and his allies as well, but he'd miscalculated. The munitions exploded into blinding brightness with a deafening clap – he had to blink it away and force the Light into his eyes. The Red Mage cursed, and when Iason's vision returned there was no sign of any goblins. All they had left behind was a red trail of burning powder in the sky. *They marked our position*, he thought. He glanced at the others. Amelia had covered her eyes with the brim of her hat, but by the looks of it the noise had still affected her.

"Run," he said, not sure how loud he was being.

The roar of the munitions was still sounding in his ears. The others understood him well enough to obey, and they headed for the closets gate without even the pretence of discretion. Dormer had turned into a ghost town, every door and window closed. In the fog, he could barely make out the shape of the houses unless he empowered his eyes with his Name. It began clearing out close to the gate. Whoever had done this, he thought, must have relied on the river to provide the water. Lucky them, they'd chosen the gate opposite. Providence. The gate was unguarded, and that was when he began doubting his last thought. No, he mused. Not unguarded. There were two people by the guardhouse. One seated on a bench, the other standing by it. Iason squinted. It was a woman, seated. Tan skin and high cheekbones, long hair in a practical leather binding behind her. Her legs were crossed and she was pulling at a pipe. The man at her side was almost inhumanly slender, a whip of a body in a long black tunic. At his hip was a sheathless sword, and one of his eyes was covered by a dark silken blindfold with silvery lettering. It was the hair that

attracted his attention, though. It must have been a trick of the light, but for an instant it had seemed made of crow's feathers.

"Iason," the Gallant Brigand urgently said. "The woman's cloak."

He looked. It must have once been entirely black, he thought, but it was no longer. A patchwork of colourful strips had been woven over it, and even some matter he did not recognized. It looked like rippling wind. The collar, though, what laid woven into it felt like a sin. That made this the Mantle of Woe, and the woman wearing it...

"Catherine Foundling," he said. "The Black Queen."

The woman spewed out a stream of smoke, still sitting. Iason met her eyes. For one of her reputation, he was distinctly unimpressed. There was no pressure there, only a young woman looking vaguely exhausted.

"Afternoon," the Black Queen said. "Welcome to the Kingdom of Callow, folks. Evidently you know who I am, so that saves us some tediousness."

"Your trap will avail you nothing," Iason said harshly.

"This isn't a trap," the villain mused. "Not unless you make it one. If I wanted you dead, Robber wouldn't have tumbled you a warning shot. It would have been goblinfire instead of brightsticks, and already it'd all be over but the screaming."

"How civilized of you," the Gallant Brigand said, her tone slightly mocking. "Since we're all being so friendly, might I venture as to ask what you want from us?"

The Black Queen spewed out a stream of smoke, studying them calmly.

"That's my line," she said. "Setting aside that you passed the border illegally, having three heavily-armed Named wandering the countryside without so much as a by-your-leave just isn't in the cards. What are you here for?"

"Introductions first," the Gallant demurred. "I am-"

"Amelia of Helike, daughter of Lasarn," the one-eyed man at her side smiled, teeth like ivory. "You are known to us."

Amelia blanched. The way he'd spokeen that last sentence... Iason was not one to frighten easily, yet it had sent a shiver down his spine.

"That's Larat," the Black Queen cheerfully said. "Or at least that's what I call him. It pisses him off a lot, but why even *have* a treacherous lieutenant if you're not going to taunt them at every opportunity?"

"We have come to study the aftermath of the fae incursion, Your Majesty," Lergo said. "Purely academic curiosity in my part, I assure you."

The lie sat ill with Iason, but he kept his mouth shut. Informing the woman that they had come to slay her and release Callow from her grasp would lead to a struggle he was not certain they could win. Not yet. The Black Queen pulled at her pipe, then sighed.

"Red Mage, was it?" she said. "A warning for you. Of all the shit decisions you've made today, trying to lie to me is close to the top of the list. Don't do it again. I take it you're here to kill me, then."

It was a little insulting, Iason thought, that she sounded more irritated than threatened by that deduction. Arrogance was ever the downfall of Evil, he reminded himself. She spewed out another mouthful of smoke.

"Then what?" she asked.

"Pardon," Lergo replied, sounding baffled.

"You kill me, glory to the Heavens and all that good stuff," she waved. "Then what?"

"The people of Callow are freed," Iason said. "They rise against the wicked Praesi and-"

"This," the Black Queen sighed as she interrupted, "is why I have to keep killing you people. Look, I understand better than anyone how easy it is to start thinking you can just stab your way out of a mess, but you haven't *thought this through*. Putting my head on a pike just makes a different sort of mess."

"That's what tyrants always say," the Gallant quietly said. "That they may be a plague, but the world would be worse without them. You have to lance a wound for it to be able heal."

"You're not lancing anything, kid," the villain said. "You're just bleeding the body. And it's been a long time since anyone thought *that* helped. Look, I'm not barring Callow to heroes. You want to wander the south healing and rebuilding? Fine by me. You get a Legion escort, but they'll stay out of your way. You want to have a swing at Black? Not my problem, but you'll have to get to the Vales through Procer. You want to actually have a look at the fae marks, or even Liesse? I'll need oaths as assurance, but we can deal. This doesn't *have* to be a fight."

She paused.

"But," she murmured. "Since I know what you're thinking. Larat."

The one-eyed man's grin broadened, and power rippled across the street. The air cooled, and Iason almost summoned his Heavenly Armaments in answer. There was might in that creature's frame, and nothing human about it.

"We've been tracking you since Mercantis," the Queen said. "We've had long enough we could have hit you still in the river. Do you know why you were allowed to make shore?"

"I assume some form of sadism is involved," the Red Made drawled.

"In a manner of speaking," the villain smiled. "See, I learned from a man that would have had you corpses at the bottom of the Hwaerte before you even noticed. But I'm trying, I guess, not to be him. Or worse."

Slowly she rose to her feet, and emptied the pipe before stewing it away in her cloak. The smile and the easy manners went away. Idly she rested her hand on the pommel of her sword, and Iason felt fear. There was iron in that woman's gaze that had not been there before.

"You've seen I'm prepared," Catherine Foundling said. "You've seen I have the muscle to put you down. But I didn't put on the fancy hat to kill kids. So *please*, I beg you – don't make me."

It sounded genuine enough that the Paladin hesitated. The sentiment that they were kids to her was insulting, but what lay behind it... *The wiles of devils are many and varied. Trust not the words of those sworn to Below, for deception is their truest tongue.* He would not balk at his duty.

"Go home," the Black Queen said tiredly. "Or Hells, join up if you want to. I'll find something for you to do, this country's still half a wreck and it's not like I don't take in heroes. But if you force this, it only ends one way. And once we start, I might not be able to stop."

"You are a blight upon Creation," the Stalwart Paladin said, almost regretfully. "An instrument of the Hellgods, carrying within the seed of damnation. May the Heavens grant you mercy in the afterlife, but for the sake of Creation you must be removed from this earthly shell."

"What he said," the Gallant Brigand agreed. "Only, you know, less priestly. Fuck you and your offer and your entire evil legions."

"Yes yes, praise the Heavens and much defiance. That aside, out of curiosity," the Red Mage smirked, "has that speech ever actually *worked*?"

The Black Queen breathed out, and in a moment she went from tired girl only a few years older than them to razor-sharp killer. It was in the eyes, in the way she held herself. She had the poise of someone used to taking lives.

"No," she said. "But I'll try with the next batch anyway. Sixth time's the charm, right?"

The one-eyed creature laughed.

"They never listen," he said, sounding pleased. "I do believe offering mercy might actually make it worse. Fascinating."

Six. Iason felt a trickle of fear go down his spine. How many heroes had she killed? No, it didn't matter. She only needed to fail once. The hero folded into himself, and let his aspect reverberate within his soul. **Arm**. Plate of pure Light formed around him, a full suit topped by a winged helmet. His sword shone radiantly and as Lergo began to incant he advanced. The villain did not move, eyes still on him, but the Paladin felt the shifting currents of power. To their side a gate opened out of thin air, and as he glanced there Iason saw two things. The first was two score goblins, bright-eyed and eager in their furs as they occupied a frozen wasteland. The second was six scorpion-like contraptions of wood and metal, and as that sunk in they began to fire. The bolt hit him in the chest, then two others, yet it might as well have been children throwing mud at a stone wall. The steel bent, the wood shattered and he barely even felt the impact. He had no moment to spare enjoying the small victory, however. The Red Mage was most endangered by this sort of assault. Though gifted with a particularly strong talent for destruction, Lergo had confessed he was incapable of even the most basic of shieldings. The sorcerer managed to save his own hide by turning to ash the handful of projectiles aimed at him, but he would not be able to keep this up forever.

The Stalwart Paladin moved between his companion and the volleys of steel-tipped bolts, letting them strike impotently at the armaments bestowed

upon him by the Heavens. The Gallant had been the most unruffled among them, dancing out of the way and somehow even parrying a projectile with a casual flick of the wrist.

"I'll break the machines," Iason said, and his voice thundered. "Keep the villains busy."

Though the Black Queen had caught them by surprise, she'd been arrogant. With only one creature and mundane soldiers at her disposal, it might be feasible to slay her here and now. To free Callow of tyranny within a day of coming to its shore would be a grand deed, worthy of hymns and remembrance. Yet if the tide turned against them, the Paladin would rather see them defeated before the fled. It would be the beginning of a Pattern of Three, he suspected, and that would greatly enhance the swiftness of their growth. Indeed, the might even encounter another hero after they fled. Providence had a way of rewarding the righteous. To Iason's mild irritation, the goblins manning the siege engines proved passingly clever. Seeing that their bolts had no effect on his armour as he advanced, they turned their fire to his companions. Some sorcery must be behind the machines, he thought, for there could be no other explanation for how swiftly they kept firing. No matter. He was quick enough on his feet that only the odd bolt made it through. Clever as the goblins were, they'd not been quite clever enough to flee his approach.

Iason crossed the gate into the frozen landscape and raised his sword the moment he felt the bite of urgency near his shoulder. It was not quite enough, the angle too awkward. A blade shattered his pauldron of Light and ripped into the chain mail below, though not deep enough to wound, and the Paladin breathed in sharply. A tall orc decked in burnt plate discarded a broken axe and spun out another, face grim. The hand of bare bones gave away the name of the greenskin that had struck him. The orc spat to the side.

"Masego will be pissed," he said. "Half a day's work and it kept for a single blow. At least you're not reforming."

Iason grit his teeth. The Heavenly Armaments did have that weakness – they could only be used once day, and could not be forged anew while in use.

"You will not land another," the Paladin promised.

The orc's eyes were on his mail, not his blade, and they narrowed. The heraldry, Iason realized. It'd been made visible by the rip.

"Half-House, le Miroir Verdant," the greenskin said in lightly accented Chantant. "Proceran, then. Good, I've been meaning to try one of you out before the big Names come."

"I am the Stalwart Paladin," Iason thundered. "And you will lose more than a hand today, orc."

"I'm the Adjutant," Hakram Deadhand replied, baring his teeth. "I had a light meal this morning."

They both moved with the swiftness of Named, tangling halfway there. Iason managed to hammer down on the orc's wrist, loosening the greenskin's grip on the axe, but the dead hand closed around his throat. The bones blackened as

the Light furiously bit into them, but they did not give and Iason struggled in vain before the Adjutant tossed him back out the portal. He landed in a crouch, shifting his weight as his fighting-master had taught him. The orc rolled his shoulders and strolled out of the gate unhurriedly.

"*Iason*," the Gallant screamed.

It felt like being kicked by a horse. The entire left side of his armaments shattered under the blow and as he flew he felt the Black Queen following with impossible swiftness. She arrived at the end of the arc before he did, snatching his foot and smashing him into the pavement. He saw her change her grip as she stood above him, ready to plunge down the point into his throat even as he tried to rise, but salvation came in time: a streak of red lightning had the villain ducking away in a hurry. The sorcerer had come through, thank the Gods. The Paladin got to his feet and took a swift look around as the Black Queen circled him slowly. Deadhand was now tangling with Amelia, and though he'd yet to land one of his brutal blows she was on the backfoot. Looking for an opening, he decided. It was not a bad match. The other conflict was. Lergo was weaving spells into one another admirably, flame and lightning and hexes flowing into the next seamlessly, but the one-eyed fae was toying with him. There were three cuts on the Red Mage's cheek, perfectly parallel and scabbed black. Iason suspected they might have been killing blows, if the fae wished it so. He needed to lose Foundling soon and come to the sorcerer's aid, or he was going to get run through when the creature bored of the game. This was no time to hold back.

"**Smite**," the Stalwart Paladin said.

The Black Queen attempted to avoid the aspect, but she was too slow. Light came down from above a perfect a perfect heptagon of seven feet on every stroke. For a moment the shape seemed almost solid, the wrath of the Heavens shattering the paving stones and even the ground beneath. A heartbeat later it was gone, leaving the half-kneeling form of a smoking villain. Her face was a tapestry of burned flesh, her hair gone up in smoke and her bare hands crushed. Her eyes were unseeing, struck blind by righteous retribution. The villain spat out a gob of black blood that steamed and ate away at the earth.

"You have William beat when it comes to impact," the woman noted, her voice a croak yet somehow cold.

She rose, and as she did the air cooled and her flesh knitted back. She shed the burnt skin like a snake, and her pupils broke as fresh ones forced themselves forward.

"As a general rule, striking aspects tend to go one of two ways," the Black Queen said, voice empty of emotion. "Broad but shallow, small but deep. I would not have walked off Swing so easily. A nice trick, but ultimately-"

"**Smite**," he interrupted.

She was standing again, which meant resuming the fight was not longer unchivalrous. There was a heartbeat between the Light striking and the word being spoken, and it was enough for her to evade.

"Ultimately still a trick," she finished, as the smiting struck the empty pavement.

Only once more could he call on the aspect. He would have to get in close, prevent her form evading and... *No*, he thought. He was being baited. She was keeping him busy while her minions killed the others. Though it grated, Iason turned and without a word ran for the Red Mage.

"Hakram," the Black Queen said, voice echoing strangely. "Switch."

The orc moved away from Amelia without missing a beat, barrelling towards the Paladin immediately. Form the corner of his eye he saw the human villain pass them both in a streak, blade sounding against the Gallant Brigand's own. Lergo cried out in pain, his incantation interrupted, and Iason's fingers clenched around his sword. It was not all lost, he thought. The Adjutant was much slower than his mistress. The axehead came whistling down but Iason's blade shifted angle, the combination of years of training and what he'd learned since coming into his Name. The Heavens-touched steel cut straight through the haft of wood and into the steel pauldron behind it. The orc began to retreat, and then the Paladin spoke.

"**Smite**."

Light filled his vision, but it was no harm to him. He felt the orc's body flinch but somehow it remained standing. Though the greenskin's footing was shot, so was his, and aside from smoking skin and amour the orc seemed unharmed when the aspect ebbed. And aspect of his own had been used, the Paladin suspected. There was the taste of power in the air. It was not enough. Iason ripped his blade free and smashed the guard in the orc's face, knocking him clear of his feet. His Light-girded boot came down and broke the villain's knee. That should cripple him for the rest of the fight. The greenskin struck out with a knife but Iason fluidly stepped back. Leaf Stirred By Hand, his master had called it, and when the knife withdrew he stepped forward following it. The blade whistled down, the orc bared his fangs and another blade knocked the killing blow away.

"You will not have him," the Black Queen said, something sharp and heavy in her tone.

She frowned, and shook her head. Something in her eyes thawed measurably as she grimaced.

"Ever grasping is the tyrant's lot," Iason replied in Chantant.

"What's he saying?" the woman asked. "My Chantant's shit, and his accent is horrible."

"He called you a tyrant," the orc said.

"Wouldn't be the first," the Black Queen grimly said, parrying his blow and landing a riposte that failed to break through the Armaments.

He was pushed back, to his fury. Years he had trained for this, gruelling hours spent in the cloister's courtyard being worked to exhaustion by his fighting-master. He'd learned the Five Ways and the Verdant Stances, been taught how to dismantle the foremost styles of every nation under the Calernian sun. But

the Queen wasn't fighting like a swordswoman. Whatever she had learned, it was no proper swordsmanship. She ignored his feint and pivoted around his back, her elbow hitting his flank and breaking his footing. He pivoted to face her but she'd moved with him and he had to give ground to avoid an oblique blow that would have carved through his throat. Iason gave further ground. Staying close, he would only get caught in her pace. It was then he realized that he could no longer hear the Red Mage fighting. He looked back and saw no sign of Lergo, or of his opponent. The air where they'd been fighting reeked of power and darkness. Gods, this was turning out too much for them. They had not been heroes long enough, none of them even had their full aspects.

"**Cut**," the Gallant Brigand coldly announced.

She emerged out of thin air behind the Black Queen, aspect howling as her blade carved clean through the villain's abdomen. She'd... done it? Then the woman's silhouette dispersed, and Iason realized they'd been had. *Glamour*, he realized with a shiver of fear. *That was glamour*. He rushed forward but it was too late. Amelia almost managed to avoid the blow out of sheer instinct, but goblin steel ripped through her coat and muscles. Her left arm fell down limply, and even as she caught her sabre with the other one the Black Queen caught her by the back of the neck and squeezed. There was a sickening crack, and just like that Amelia was dead. There was not so much as a flicker of emotion on the villain's face, he saw. Not a speck of humanity to be found. Just ice and hatred wearing a body. Her silhouette blurred for what must not even have been a heartbeat, and Iason pushed through the grief. Glamour again, and he could not see through it. He stepped back warily, and the impotence of it burned. Sharpening his ears found nothing, she was stepping lightly and her illusion advancing towards him. He needed to see, he needed to find her, he needed to...

Discern.

Power rippled through the Paladin's frame washing him clear of tiredness and pain and the weakness of the flesh. This was more than mere sight, he knew instinctively. It would tell truth from lies, read the movements of the flesh before they came to fruition. He could see her now, wreathed in mirror-like mist. She was stalking his side, eyes patient.

"Enough," he snarled. "You will not get away with this, *butcher*."

He caught her by surprise, striking without warning. He glimpsed the parry before it ever rose, flicked his blade to the side and cut into her shoulder. She wove back, her footing swift, but his Light-gauntleted hand struck her across the mouth. He headbutted his winged helmet but came off the loser for it, forehead bleeding as he returned in kind and she rocked back in pain. His fist caught her in the stomach and she gasped. His blade shone radiantly as it scored a deep cut across her upper leg, but somehow the cutting of her muscles was not enough to make her fall. Fingers coated in frost and shadow slugged into his cheek, shattering the Light, and the two of them fell to the ground struggling. Using his weight to come atop her, he caught her wrist and dug

his finger into her eye. She bit him, down to the bloody bone, and he snatched his hand back before he could lose the finger. She struggled under him but he was much heavier, and his fist broke her chin before she could wrestle away his arm. He'd felt teeth loosen. Forcing her arm aside his fingers closed around her throat, and suddenly she smiled.

The knife went ripped through the mail as Adjutant struck into his flank. Iason was thrown off the Black Queen by hundreds of pounds of angry orc, as as he hit the ground the world slowed. Light wreathed him, but still soft fingers touched his forehead. The Stalwart Paladin closed his eyes, an opened them in an endless spread of pale blankness.

You will bleed, a chorus of voices whispered into his ear. **You will suffer. You will weep, yet find no relief. Though your soul is young and your weight feeble, you will take on the burden of many. Iason, son of Idrim, We offer you the misery of Endurance. We would embrace you one of our own, to blood and tears and bitter end. Iason Brightsword, Son of Tears, will you withstand horror so that others do not?**

"Yes," Iason whispered into the void.

The blankness rippled, and he was no longer alone. Two silhouettes with burning eyes and unspeakable shapes stood before him. And another, between him and them.

"There will be none of that," Catherine Foundling sharply said.

You do not belong here.

The weight of their wrath was crushing, almost enough that Iason fell to his knees and it was not him they gaze upon in anger. Yet the Black Queen stood undaunted, cloaked in ice and shadows. And more. There was a silhouette riding her back, arms laced around her shoulders. A beautiful and dark-skinned woman.

"I already told the Hashmallim to walk it off," she said. "Am I really going to have to revisit this with every fucking Choir?"

Arrogance. Your doom comes.

"Might be," she said. "But not today, and not through this weak an instrument. Fuck off, you bottom feeders. This one's been claimed fair and square."

"You can't fight angels," Iason hissed.

"Who said anything about fighting *them*?" Catherine Foundling said, and then she rammed a knife in his belly.

The blankness fled, Iason's eyes opened and the last thing he ever felt was a spike of frost going through his forehead.

Interlude: Stairway

> "Though official records state that the Principate fought a mere score civil wars, it should be noted that this does not include wars fought between less than five principalities. Should the definition be amended, Procer has on average fought a civil war every decade since the year of its founding. No single nation has ever spilled so much Proceran blood as the Principate itself."
>
> Extract from 'The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

The trouble with this war, Prince Klaus Papenheim had told his niece since the first day, wasn't that it wasn't going to be a war. It was going to be half a dozen of them, fought all across Calernia more or less simultaneously. That was the great danger looming within the Tenth Crusade, that once all the forces had been put in motion there was no adjusting the blows. Cordelia, bless her soul, had taken his warnings seriously. The face of warfare had changed while the Principate clawed itself bloody, and now Procer had to change with it or be left behind. He'd never asked how his niece had gotten her hands on the Praesi. It was for the best, he'd decided. The Prince of Hannoven had been raised with death as mother's milk, but the fight against the Plague was clean in a way the games in the south weren't. They made sport of men's lives, down here, and he'd never had the stomach for that. Regardless, the ten Wastelanders had offered up the most precious secret of the East: the rituals of scrying, that old Praesi trick turned into a lethal tool of war by the Carrion Lord. The spells that allowed armies with entire kingdoms between them to move as one, taking apart hosts twice their size with surgical precision.

Gathering wizards to learn them had been costly, he suspected, and it must have been more so to keep the magelings in the Principate's service after. Though in Lycaonese lands spellcasters were prized, for their sorcery was a mighty thing wielded from walls against the ratling hordes, the southerners had a more complicated relationship with spellslingers. Wizards and witches had once owned a seat on the Highest Assembly, in recognition of their great contributions in easing the alliance between Arlesites and Alamans that first founded the Principate. Yet in the centuries since they had fallen out of favour. Their great influence, often second only to the rulers of principalities, had been

seen as a threat by the royals of the south. Meddling in an election had turned on them when the candidate they opposed, Louis Merovins, managed a narrow victory. The man had spent most his reign suppressing them after revoking their Assembly seat in retaliation, a struggle finally brought to an end two rulers down the line when the mage association known as L'Oeuil D'Or was forcefully disbanded.

Since then the casters had become tradesmen like any other, offering charms and potions for coin – though never healing, as the House of Light frowned upon any infringing upon their hold in that domain. Some cities in the south still had informal assemblies, he'd been told, but they were toothless things and kept that way by ancient decrees banning the collection of dues while still imposing heavy taxes. Until now. First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach of Procer had, in the wake of her speech announcing the Tenth Crusade, founded the Order of the Red Lion. An congregation of wizards and witches exempted from the old decrees, in exchange for sworn service to the crown. Hundreds of them, who might be passable war casters at best but all knew how to scry with a degree of skill. Klaus had a hard laugh, when he learned the charter binding the Grand Alliance together had specific provisions for such an order without ever naming it. His niece had been moving her pieces into place for near a decade now.

The Prince of Hannoven was pleased with the addition of the mages to his war council, though not because of their pleasant personalities. Near all of them were strutting Alamans pups, drunk on the shiny new heraldry and fresh importance. None of them seemed to understand they were not the sudden dawn of wizardly resurgence but instead a glorified pack of messengers. They had no say in where they were deployed, Klaus having decided the arrangements himself after consulting some of his own – much more trustworthy – Lycaonese mages. Dozens had been sent south to the Dominion, to keep the mustering armies of Levant pointed in the right direction, and near a hundred sent in little linked clusters his wizards called 'relays' to make it possible to keep the lines open to the Ashuran fleets even as they sailed. The rest had been spread with measured weighing of priorities, linking first to Salia where his niece ruled but also to the forces that Prince Amadis had schemed his way to leading. The Iserran weasel needed a close eye kept on him, and Klaus would have preferred to lead those armies himself if he could. He knew why he could not, though.

In the Red Flower Vales awaited the two men he considered to be the greatest field commanders of this era: Marshal Grem One-Eye and the Carrion Lord.

Sending the likes of Amadis against them would have been like throwing oil at a fire, and Cordelia had reluctantly told him that the man had intrigued too well to be entirely side-lined from command. The Prince of Iserre, however, had been too clever for his own good. With him were the armies of the remainder of his pack of intriguing malcontents, and every unruly fantassin his niece had been able to scrape together. Nearly fifty thousand in total, a host almost as large as the one Klaus was commanding. But it would be the Queen of Cal-

low that Amadis tangled with, and the Prince of Hannoven had heard much about that one of late. He'd once dismissed her as a nobody, during the Liesse Rebellion, but he'd been made to eat that dismissal raw since. She'd gone from victory to victory in the last few years, and if half the rumours about what her pack of villains was doing to heroes making their way into Callow were true... Well, there was one in every generation. Klaus' had borne the Black Knight that awaited him in the Vales, and the great monster of Cordelia's own looked to be the murderous orphan who'd set her throne atop a sea of corpses.

Prince Amadis would win, he suspected. The shit had more than a dozen heroes at his back, and two old forces of nature among them. It'd been a pleasant surprise to find out that Laurence was still alive, old sack of piss and vinegar that she was. The Saint of Swords was an army unto herself, and the Grey Pilgrim that went with her was supposed to be some kind of legend in Levant. No, Amadis would come out ahead. But the villains would bloody him and wreck the armies of his allies – and as the commander of that host, all the blame would fall on his shoulders afterwards. There'd be no more agitating the Highest Assembly for the Prince of Iserre, after that disgrace. Klaus spat to the side in disapproval, alone in his tent with the latest correspondence. It was sinful that good, honest soldiers would die in that mess but that was the nature of war. The Veiled Lady not discern between deserving and not when she claimed the butcher's bill. Enough of Amadis' backers knew their way around a battlefield that a real debacle would be avoided, at least. There was noise outside the prince's tent and he set down the latest supply census – Brabant had cut corners on what they brought, the fucking cheapskates – to rise to his feet.

"What's the racket, men?" he called out.

"Your Grace, I have-"

The voice yelped instead of finishing, preceded by the sound of a spear's butt hitting a foot none too gently. Klaus passed a hand through greying hair and sighed. That was one of his wizards, he was certain. The eager shits were still under the impression that military protocol did not apply to them since they served under the First Prince instead of the army itself.

"Victoria, let him in," the Prince of Hannoven said.

"Bertrand de Guison, officer of the Order of the Red Lion," his guard announced, her tone darkly amused as she parted the tent's folds.

Klaus would need to have a talk with her. Her dislike for southerners was well-earned – her two sons had died on Alamans fields fighting to put Cordelia on the throne – but the magelings were too useful to be roughed up over petty offenses. The wizard entered limping, his heavy robes emblazoned with a rampant red lion on pale. He couldn't have been more than thirty, Klaus thought, and that he believed that to be young suddenly reminded him how old he'd gotten. Even his niece was closer to thirty than twenty, now. *A Papenheim hold vigil until death relieves them*, his father had always told him, but the Veiled

Lady had seen fit to spare Klaus longer than he'd believed possible. So few of his time were left, save for enemies.

"Your Grace," the mage bowed. "I herald news of great import."

He'd called out in Reitz when he was outside the tent, but now the boy was speaking Chantant. The Prince of Hannoven squinted. He'd had lessons as a child and spoke the Alamans tongue well enough, but never quite managed to shed his Lycaonese accent. It made him sound like an ignorant brute, he was well aware. Just for that, the mage got to stand throughout the conversation.

"I'm listening," Klaus said.

"The chapter of the Order assigned to the *Rightful Due* has contacted us," Bertrand eagerly said. "Admiral Hadast has struck the first blow of the Tenth Crusade."

That would be Magon Hadast's son, Klaus noted, not the Ashuran ruler himself. The head of the Thalassocracy was too old and fragile to campaign himself. The 'Rightful Due' – Gods, the fucking Ashurans and their ship names – was the flagship of the Thalassocracy's first war fleet. It'd set sail more than a month ago, and true to their reputation the Ashuran ships and their wind mages were striking with impossible haste.

"A victory, is it?" Klaus asked.

The mage nodded.

"One for the ages, Your Grace," he said. "The Tideless Isles were seized with but a handful of Ashuran ships sunk, and ten times as many prize hulls seized from the corsairs. What few are not dead or in chains fled for the Wasteland."

And so the first battle of the Tenth Crusade was fought hundreds of miles away from the Empire, Ashur snatching anchorage for its fleets before it began attacking Praes from the coast. It was beginning, Klaus thought. Now the Praesi would have to move troops to protect their coastal cities, denying reinforcements to the western front even as Ashur burned and looted everything within earshot of waves. Now that Hadast was in place, armies could finally begin to march.

"Contact your fellows in the Northern Army," Klaus told the mage. "Pass this message to Prince Amadis: the seal is broken, climb the stairs."

"By your will, Your Grace," the man bowed elaborately.

Gods, Alamans. They turned every conversation into a bloody play.

"That aside," Bertrand continued, "your guard-"

"I didn't see anything," Klaus grunted. "There's a war on, boy. Get moving."

The wizard looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but learning some humility would do him good. The prince waited until the mage was gone before speaking again.

"Victoria," he called out. "Get yourself relieved and come in to pour yourself a drink."

Prince Klaus Papenheim frowned.

"And find the White Knight and his gaggle too, while you're at it," he said. "I'll want a word with them before we march on the Vales."

—

Prince Amadis Milenan's fingers drummed the table lightly. The sound of it was soothing, and well worth the expense of having brought the furniture from his summer palace in Iserre. Amadis had ruled his principality for more than twenty years now, and steered it unfailingly through troubles and civil war largely because he had a knack for telling which way the wind was blowing. At the peak of the civil war, he'd been considered a key supporter of Princess Aenor of Aequitan while secretly corresponding with both Princess Constance of Aisne and Prince Dagobert of Lange – before the latter's grisly demise at the hands of Hasenbach's northern savages, anyway. No matter who triumphed he had been positioned to become one of the most influential princes in the Highest Assembly. By refraining from pressing his own claim while keeping close ties with neighbouring principalities, he'd ensured that Iserre would come out of the strife wealthy and pristine: from there, it would have been child's play to trade marriages for concessions and arrange for his kin to rule Procer when the time came. Then the Battle of Aisne happened, and Cordelia Hasenbach broke the board.

He'd not been there himself, preferring to send one of his many cousins to command the levies he had sent to aid the coalition. But he'd heard stories. Of entire allied armies turning against princesses he'd considered among the most cunning and dangerous alive halfway through the battle. Of the brutal slaughter the Lycaonese had visited upon the flower of the south's manhood. That defeat sounded across all of Procer, and in the wake of that sound Amadis found his careful plans lay shattered on the ground. Still, he'd come out of the disaster better than any of his former allies and set to work leveraging that sudden prominence. His ties in Orne and Cantal served him well, soon bolstered by generously termed loans to Creusens and wedding his youngest daughter to the heir to Segovia. The aging Princess Luisa has sided with Hasenbach after she broke Prince Dagobert and remained a close ally after, reaping the benefits of her early support, but her son had greater ambitions than being the loyal dog of a northerner First Prince. Princess Aenor's successor, Princess Rozala, eventually joined his alignment as well after she found her mother's old supporters closing their doors to her in an attempt to curry favour with Hasenbach.

Six principalities stood behind him, out of the twenty-three that formed Procer. Twenty-four, counting Salia, but as it was the seat and personal domain of whoever claimed the crown its officials avoided partisanship. It was a greater portion of the realm than it seemed. The four Lycaonese principalities to the north were ardent Hasenbach supporters, but estranged from the courts of the south and forced to spend what little coin they had seeing to their borders with the Chain of Hunger. Cleves and Hainault had turned inwards after their disastrous adventures in the civil war, fearing the Kingdom of the Dead would catch scent of their weakness and begin raiding their shores again. Over a third of the principalities still relevant to rule of Procer stood behind him. Amadis did not have the votes in the Highest Assembly to dismantle Hasen-

bach's position, not unless she blundered and angered rulers keeping aloft. But he was now widely considered the second most powerful ruler in the Principate, and even the hint of his displeasure gave other princes pause.

Not that the First Prince had been idle all this time. She was, Amadis would concede, a much defter hand at the Ebb and the Flow than any Lycaonese should be. That clever bit of diplomacy with Levant had tied Orense to her with a debt of gratitude, and his own admittedly lacklustre military record meant that Salamans and Tenerife preferred looking for protection against Helike with the First Prince than his own faction. Their support had borne fruit, with twenty thousand men being sent south to guard the border even as the rest of the Principate gathered for war. Yet for all her cleverness, Hasenbach was not beloved. Her heavy-handed reforms of the bureaucracy in Salia had won her no friends among the highborn who had once enjoyed lucrative sinecures close to the heart of Procer's power. The decrees she had passed trough the Highest Assembly to disburse funds for the upkeep of fortresses guarding the borders with the Chain of Hunger and the Dead King's realm were similarly unpopular with the impoverished south, though she'd had the votes to force them through regardless.

Still, Amadis had never considered the woman a true threat to his rising ascendance. Watching the massive undertaking she had apparently managed to prepare under his nose without a single soul noticing, however, he was coming to reconsider that assessment.

There must have been at least five hundred mages involved, he thought as he left his tent and came to stand in the field. That meant easily thrice that number in servants and tradesmen supporting them, the sum of it making a sizeable town on its own. And there must have been soldiers, to ward off anyone curious even in this distant stretch of the Principate. The Prince of Arans must have been involved as well, for all this was taking place amidst his lands, and never had Amadis unearthed so much as a hint that the man was one of Hasenbach's. Neither had his people in the treasury found trace of the sizeable amount of coin that must have been allocated in seeing such an undertaking through. Had the gold come through the Lycaonese principalities? Fielding their armies south in the civil war should have nearly beggared them, it should not have been possible. Unless, of course, Hasenbach had falsified the books in Salia. The Prince of Iserre hummed. He could have her censured for that. The measure was mostly symbolic, and required simple majority to pass. Would it be worth it to call in the favours? It would certainly blacken her name, but to make such a play as a crusade unfolded might do the same for his own.

Someone came to stand by his side, and a low whistle was let out.

"She plays a deeper game than we thought," Princess Rozala of Aequitan said.

Barely twenty, Amadis thought, with all her mother's beauty yet none of the grace. Being raised in a time of war had done nothing for her manners, a shame given the past glories of her hallowed line. Iserre and Aequitan had

been foes as often as they were allies, over the centuries, a complicated dance of love and hate that saw the lines between rivalry and alliance ever blurred. No one understood better than his people that a skilled enemy could serve as better ally than a friend.

"I discern the Prince of Hannoven's hand in this," Amadis said. "It is too... martial a measure to be the First Prince's own thought."

"It certainly explains why she had us getting drunk near the border with Bayeux instead of mustering with the Iron Prince in Orne, anyway," Princess Rozala mused. "And here I thought she merely wanted to keep you from getting your grubby paws all over her allies."

"A mark of weakness, that she would find it needful to do so," Amadis said with a thin smile. "Too many of her backers see the sense in what I say."

"There's no great brilliance in pointing out that Callow is ripe for the taking, Amadis," the Princess of Aequitan snorted. "Anyone with eyes can see it. It's the division of the spoils that's going to set tongues wagging. Assuming we can even wrest the right to dispose of them."

"Enough of the Highest Assembly took command of their armies we can convoke a session in Callow without her," the Prince of Iserre murmured. "With the right promises we could circumvent her entirely."

Neither needed to say that if this took place, Hasenbach's reign would never recover from the blow. It was one thing for a decree to be defeated in the Assembly – not even the most beloved of First Princes had avoided that indignity at least once – but for a ruling First Prince's known intent to be defied that openly? She would barely even qualify as a figurehead, after. The disgrace might be enough for her to abdicate and flee back north with her tail between her legs. There were other ways to chance the face of the Principate's rule than mere warfare. The two of them stood in uneasy silence afterwards, looking at the work of the mages. The ritual had begun with dawn yet was not even half-done by his reckoning. The harsh slopes of the mountains separating Procer from Callow burned away under constant sorcerous fire, leaving behind smoking steps of stone stretching ever further. Now that the Prince of Hannoven had given his leave, Amadis had been filled in on the full details of this little scheme of the First Prince's. Though no great commander himself, the Prince of Iserre knew enough of martial endeavours to be aware that the Kingdom of Callow's great advantage in war had always been that the only path of entry from the west was the Red Flower Vales. Narrow passes and valleys, whose fortifications had only grown more expansive since the Wastelanders had annexed Callow.

This was no longer true.

The Stairway, as Hasenbach's lieutenant among the mages called it, was the work of years in ritual preparation and planning: an exhausting labour that would carve a way through the mountains between the principality of Arans and northern Callow at the narrowest point in the mountains. The planned point of emergence was to the north of the city of Harrow – which was, he'd been

assured, essentially undefended. Amadis had been ordered to take his host through the Stairway and begin a march south, shattering every army in his path until he took the defences of the Red Flower Vales from behind while the host of Prince Klaus Papenheim assaulted them from the front. He'd also been mandated to establish negotiations with the Duchy of Daoine, though it had been made clear to him treating with Duchess Kegan would be handled by one of the First Prince's personal envoys. In this, he was not worried. Callow was such a lawless place, these days. Envoys could meet with all sorts of accidents as they journeyed. And if they did, well, was it not his duty as a loyal subject of Procer to fill that void? A diplomatic victory with the Deoraithe would do much to solidify his position before he convoked the Highest Assembly within Callow. The higher is fortunes rose, the lower Hasenbach's fell.

"The wizards tell me the ritual will be completed within two days," Prince Amadis of Iserre told his accomplice. "We must swiftly steal a march afterwards."

"Steal a march," Princess Rozala repeated mockingly. "My, how commandingly you speak to me. One would almost believe you to be the leader of this glorious host of ours."

Amadis smiled at her.

"How *is* your brother these days?" he asked. "I hear his talents as an orator have thawed even the First Prince's disposition."

The woman's face turned dark, and she looked away. Rozala did need the occasional reminder of how flimsy her position in Aequitan truly was, with her younger brother currying favour at court. Hasenbach was unlikely to be so gauche as to directly intervene in a principality's affairs of succession, but she could do a great deal to help the boy's cause without tipping her hand.

"Let us not quarrel, Your Grace," Amadis said. "Can you not feel it? We are going to make history, you and I."

The Prince of Iserre's smile broadened as he watched the Stairway grow. The world, he knew, was on the eve of great changes. And Amadis Milenan would be at the heart of them.

Chapter 1

Observatory

> "Those who withstood the sword, I laid low with ink."
>
> Words carved into the tomb of Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

I rarely used the council room these days. Under the Fairfaxes the King's Council had been the greatest organ of power in the realm, closer to the crown than any and wielding influence far beyond that of the titles of the men and women having been appointed to it. I'd retained only parts of it, though, the ones I found useful. I had no need for a Chamberlain to see to the 'royal household', when mine was essentially me and whatever part of the Woe happened to be in Laure at the time. And even then I doubted Thief had slept in her chambers more than twice. She preferred prowling the city when she was there. Masego disdained his rooms as well, though for reasons somewhat more worrying. No, broadening the authority of the palace's seneschal had been quite sufficient. Not that all old roles had been so easily disposed of. With Anne Kendall in the seat of Governess-General, Juniper as my Marshal and Ratface as my Lord Treasurer there'd been only on seat left worth filling: Keeper of the Seals. In the old kingdom, those had been tasked with overseeing courts of law and making sure the decrees of the crown were upheld across Callow. That seemed a glorified clerk's position, until one remembered the way the kingdom had functioned under the Fairfaxes.

Though laws decreed in Laure held sway across the realm in theory, in practice the hair-raising labyrinth of ancient privileges and prerogatives held by most highborn houses made it a nightmare for any single decree to be uniformly observed. I'd been amused to learn that House Talbot, whose old demesne was now my own, had for several centuries been allowed to trade in lands directly held by the crown without tariffs as part of an old deal that saw a generous loan offered to a king so he could build a summer palace by the Silver Lake. I'd been even more amused to learn that said palace had been wrecked by Praesi within the decade when they attempted to invade the heartlands of Callow through an

underwater invasion – orcs with gills, apparently – down the Pening river. One of the Malignants, that'd been, I was pretty sure. A Dread Emperor of the worst mould, incompetent at everything but murderously ensuring his rivals didn't overthrow him. Regardless of historical curiosities, the Empire had actually allowed me to inherit a significantly more centralized realm in many ways. With Baron Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Morley of Harrow the only two remaining landed nobles in Callow, I didn't have nearly as many powerful people barking about privileges and prerogatives.

What I did end up having, however, was my court's first real power struggle. Now that the governors across Callow all answered to the crown through the Governess-General the office of Keeper of the Seals held a lot more direct power than it'd used to, with a lot less pushback to boot. Crown decrees had a lot more teeth, these days, and the Keeper had a great deal of latitude in ensuring they were upheld. Everyone and their sister had gone after the appointment, beginning the charm offensive the moment I was crowned. The only ones who'd stayed out of the fray were the Deoraithe, and I'd almost asked Kegan to send me a competent cousin just for that. Brandon Talbot and his tribe of old aristocrats had been the most ferocious, though the northern baronies had tried to muscle his people out – the fight between the powers in Laure and the distant northern nobles was an old one. A few eldermen in Laure had actually tried to bribe Ratface into putting in a good word for their candidate, banking on the Taghreb reputation for venality, and instead found themselves fined for the exact same sum and unceremoniously drummed out of office.

I picked a southerner, in the end, after tasking Baroness Kendall to find me a suitable one. After the massacre at Second Liesse, what had once been the duchy of the same name and even the region as a whole had been on the brink of collapse. It'd only been the reparations I obtained from the Empress and Hakram's feverish work that kept the place from eating itself alive, and even now it was the most unstable part of my realm. A major city and over a hundred thousand people were gone form the heart of the south, it wasn't something that could be healed in a year. Or even a decade. Binding whatever powers remained down there to the crown had been necessary, and my Governess-General managed to dig up a candidate that wouldn't fuck up the duties that came with the appointment. Edith Westmore had once been a lady in her own right, before her liege lord took up arms in the Liesse Rebellion, and even after had remained a wealthy landowner. She had the reputation and the connections to be a capable Keeper of Seals, and though I wasn't particularly fond of her as a person neither did she grate my nerves. It was no lifetime appointment, regardless.

Lady Edith was not here in my solar, not this afternoon anyway. I'd had the richly-panelled room furnished more to my tastes – which largely meant removing all the more ostentatious stuff and filling the new liquor cabinet to the brim – and these days I conducted most royal business in here. The comfortable surroundings helped allay the inevitable bouts of tediousness that seemed

to accompany the work of making Callow into a halfway-functioning nation. My two companions at the table bathed by afternoon sun were the two members of my council I saw most often: Governess-General Anne Kendall and Lord Treasurer Hasan Qara. Who still insisted on being called Ratface, though he'd come to embrace the sobriquet of Bastard Lord as well. He got a kick of how much it horrified Praesi envoys.

"We've another petition from Hedges," Anne said, shuffling parchments. "On the subject of tariffs in Laure and Southpool."

The silver-haired woman glanced delicately at my treasurer after speaking. Ratface seemed distinctly unamused, though the irritation was not directed at Kendall.

"They're trying to flood the markets with wool," the Taghreb told me. "They have entire warehouses going to waste, the Jacks confirmed it."

'The Jacks' was a very fancy title for my ever-growing web of thieves, smugglers, spies and sundry informants. It was nowhere as unified and well-organized as the appellation implied, with Aisha's network of kinsmen in Praes, Ratface's guildsmen and Thief's *friend*s being different organizations entirely. Adjutant oversaw the whole mess of disparate reports and pieced it together into a coherent picture before bringing it to me. As for the name, well, it was known in some circles that the Guild of Thieves was now in my pay. Mutterings at my court about *lowly knaves* entering the crown's service had been frequent in early days, and Vivienne had amused herself by picking a fucking pun she knew I'd despise but still have to use frequently – knave was another name for a jack, in Callowan card decks. Of all my companions, Thief was the one whose sense of humour always ended up screwing me some way or another.

"They would eat at their own profits if they did," Kendall frowned. "Compared to selling to the crown they would be making a loss."

"We're not buying as much anymore," I noted. "South's mostly settled, all the notable tent cities are clothed and fed."

"It's a farsighted ploy," Ratface told us. "They're not after immediate profit here, they're trying to put the local guilds out of business. After they've cornered the market, they can start slowly raising prices. Thalassina tried the same thing with the spice trade under Nefarious, it nearly started a war with Nok."

"If they spent half as much time seeing to their own as they do thinking up ways to fuck with me, the north would be a godsdamned paradise," I said through gritted teeth.

Baroness Kendall cleared her throat.

"Though I cannot speak as to the mercantile effects," she said, "from a diplomatic perspective we have already done much to antagonize Hedges. A concession might be in order."

"I prevented them from fleecing desperate refugees, Anne," I flatly replied. "I didn't exactly piss in their morning porridge."

"All they see is expected gold never reaching their coffers," my Governess-General said. "And I must remind you that our grasp on the region is still feeble. Fear will only get us so far."

Fear was what had gotten us anything at all, I thought. I had no illusions about the loyalty of those two holdout baronies. I doubted they'd truly join the fold within my lifetime. Even confirming nearly all their old privileges – the right to mint their own coin being the largest abolished – and leaving their holdings untouched they still wanted more. *Aristocrats*. My growing exposure to the lot of them had done nothing to improve my opinion of the breed, save for a few exceptions.

"Quotas," I finally said. "Enough they can get a foothold, not enough they can eat the whole cake. And make it clear to the right people that I expect positions on having observing Legion officers attached to their armies to... change accordingly."

Kendall inclined her head, the touch of the sun on her locks rather fetching as she did. For a woman her age she remained strikingly beautiful.

"I'll have a proposal drafted," Ratface said. "Now, I know we've spoken of this before but..."

I grimaced, fairly sure I knew what was coming.

"There is too much Imperial coinage circulating in Callow, Catherine," he said. "We need to start buying it up."

Were I not Named, I might never have noticed the slight crease on the Governess-General's brow when she heard Ratface refer to me by my given name. She and I had once been more familiar as well, but that had gone up in smoke since my coronation. Anne Kendall was a patriot to the bone: it didn't matter how I'd gotten my crown, now that I wore it I was to be treated as loftily as any Fairfax.

"You're my treasurer," I sighed. "You know damn well we don't have the funds for that. And the Empress might see it as provocation, which we *really* can't afford at the moment."

A year of regular reports had made it painfully clear to me that while Praesi troops might no longer garrison my cities or Praesi lords rule them, Praesi influence was far from gone. I'd spent so much time paying attentions to borders and armies that I'd never considered the Wasteland would still have a leash in the form of coin and commerce. Trade with Procer had pretty much ended after the Conquest, and trade to Mercantis had been dominated by Imperial governors. The wealth came from the east, these days, and there was precious little I could do about that at the moment. Not when it was the Tower's gold that had rebuilt an entire third of my realm. I'd had to make concessions to ensure that materialized, too. We'd been keeping Callow afloat for the last year by gouging the High Lords scrabbling for grain through trade permits and set prices, but the Tower had been exempted from both. To an extent, anyway. I'd insisted on keeping large reserves in anticipation of the crusade.

"So long as nearly half the coinage in Callow is from the Imperial Mint, the Tower can break the realm's coffers at will," Ratface said. "All the Empress needs to do is devalue her currency and the south goes up in flames. It's a knife at our throat, Catherine. I understand the Hellhound is riding you about funding for the army, but another thousand men will make no difference if we can't *pay* those soldiers."

"Our own coin is slowly displacing the others," Baroness Kendall pointed out. "Patience might be the wisest answer."

The Taghreb shook his head.

"We're replacing old Callowan coinages," he said. "We barely touched the Wasteland portion. The Carrion Lord spent decades making certain Callow was dependent on Imperial coin for trade, it is not work that can be undone in a few years' span. Not unless we plan and invest."

"There has to be an alternative to just taking the Empress' gold off the streets by emptying our coffers, Ratface," I said. "That'd be as good as raising a banner in her eyes. There would be immediate retaliation."

The handsome man wrinkled his nose, rather unbecomingly.

"Using Mercantis as a third party, perhaps," he finally said. "It would be slower and costlier, and still have us vulnerable to foreign influence."

I sighed.

"Draft-"

"A proposal, yes," he finished amusedly. "Ah, the joys of queenship."

"Don't you fucking start," I muttered. "Between this and learning all those godsdamned Proceran languages my eyes are going to fall off."

Baroness Kendall delicately cleared her throat.

"Not to add undue burden, but there is one last petition," she said.

"Go on," I grunted. "As long as it's not our man in Vale whining about granary distribution again."

"Officials have presented a formal request that the court return to the use of the Alban calendar," she told me.

I snorted.

"Yeah, that's not happening," I said. "The Legions all use –"

I heard the movement behind the door before the knock sounded. My ears pricked. Man, late thirties, fine health. He smelled of anxiousness, though well short of fear.

"Enter," I called out before he'd finished knocking.

I felt the gaze of the other two on me. Ah. I really needed to stop doing that. It did tend to make people uncomfortable. It was a servant, who I did not recognize though the livery made it clear he was one of the palace staff.

"Your Majesty," he greeted me, bowing low before offering shallower bows to the others.

He'd been slightly reluctant when it came to Ratface's turn, I noted. There'd been a lot of that since the moment I first appointed the Taghreb. I raised an expectant eyebrow at him.

"There is word from, uh, the Observatory," the man said. "Your presence has been requested. The Lord Hierophant allegedly spoke of a 'major phenomenon'."

Translation: Masego had summoned me while, again, forgetting you weren't actually supposed to summon queens. I didn't really mind, but his brutal lack of regard for etiquette did seem to unsettle the servants whenever they came in contact with it. I rose to my feet, pushing my seat back.

"We'll reconvene in an hour to finish this," I told the other two.

"You speak so queenly, these days," Ratface grinned. "I haven't seen you spit on the ground in months."

"Yeah, well, I own all the carpets now," I muttered.

We made our courtesies, some more courteously than others, and then I dismissed the servant who seemed intent on accompanying me. I knew the way to the Observatory: I'd paid for the damned thing to be built out of an uninhabited wing of the palace. I wasn't keeping a mistress, or a husband for that matter, so luxurious rooms reserved for one had been more than a little unnecessary. It wasn't a long walk, but I lengthened my stride out of impatience. Still took the time to greet the servants and officials I came across, though. Actually learning all the names was a daydream given their sheer number, but if I could get at least half right it'd be a start. Better than Archer, anyway, who just called them whatever she felt like at the time. Getting this damned thing built had been strolling right into a series of rows with most my closest advisors, Juniper and Ratface the worst of them. My former Supply Tribune had been appalled at the costs involved, especially since some materials had to be brought directly from the Wasteland, while the Hellhound had bluntly told me that for the same amount of coin we could arm and armour over a thousand men and that'd be a lot more useful in the long run. It was rare enough for the two of them to agree on anything that I'd seriously reconsidered my commitment.

It'd still been built, in the end, and Masego had proved that his work had value beyond gold or steel. Without the Observatory at least three heroes would have slipped into Callow unseen, and the results of that could have been disastrous.

I felt the outer wards long before I arrived at the end of the corridor. As the only way in or out of the Observatory, it was now the most scrupulously protected part of the palace. The full line of legionaries guarding the corridor saluted as I went by, and I nodded back. Hakram's people, these. The amount of soldiers and bureaucrats under Adjutant's direct command had steadily increased along with his responsibilities. My blood was keyed into the outer wards, which were more trap than boundary, and so I got to the bronze gates with only a mild headache to show for it. I rapped my knuckles against the metal, careful to moderate my strength. There was still a dent left from the one time I'd forgotten. The bronze doors opened after a few heartbeats, and behind them stood a dark-skinned woman. She hastily knelt. Fadila Mbafeno had been one of Akua's minions once, before I spared her at Hierophant's request.

She'd since served as an assistant in his mage's tower, and now effectively ran the Observatory. On parchment Masego's word was law here, so long as I did not contradict him, but his utter disinterest in the logistics of the place meant all the responsibilities were in the Soninke mage's hands.

I disliked her, though not enough to do anything about it, but I would not deny she was extremely competent. Diabolist had always picked the cream of the crop, when it came to minions. Not that it'd ever stopped her from sacrificing them at the drop of a hat.

"Your Majesty," Fadila said. "I invite you within."

Nothing changed, visibly at least. There was a subtle current of power beneath her words, but even trying to feel it out would disperse it. I knew better than to think that'd been an empty sentence, though. I still vividly remembered the searing pain that had followed trying to pass the threshold without explicit permission.

"Rise," I said, and strode by her.

Passing the threshold was not painful, per se. It was more like being squeezed through a very narrow gap, a temporary constriction of my being. Once inside the room proper there was a sense of relief, but I knew from experience it would be short-lasting. A bigger cage was still a cage. The inner Observatory was warded up something fierce, some of those defences specifically against fae. They were deeply unpleasant for me, but I'd deal with the discomfort if it meant Larat couldn't ever set foot in here. Falida rose as bid, and followed three full steps behind me a little to the left. Wasteland etiquette, I thought sardonically, though in all fairness Callow had its fair share of little quirks as well. What had once been a full wing of the royal palace had been ripped out of even load-bearing walls, discreet arcs instead supporting the weight of the domed ceiling now. It was a single massive room and awake with quiet activity. Circling at the feet of the walls a boardwalk of granite made an outer ring, linked to pebbled paths that made up the spokes of a giant wheel from a bird's eye view. Within those spaces pools of dark water lay still, save for when mages stirred them to life with whispered spells. Scrying pools, particularly powerful ones.

Getting the mages to keep them manned had been difficult, since the Army of Callow was already short on spellcasters, and ultimately I'd had to draft a few competent officers then draw heavily upon the now-disbanded Guild of Hedges. Getting Masego to teach those middling sorcerers how to scry properly had been a rough conversation, but he'd ultimately conceded than an empty Observatory would rather defeat the point of raising it in the first place. The legal status of the sorcerers had been a thorny matter to handle even after they were trained. They could not part of the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror, as Juniper was still a general in the Empress' employ as well as my marshal and that would give Malicia a degree of influence over them. I'd not wanted to give the court any sway over them either, but placing them under my direct authority would meant the moment Hakram and I went on campaign

they fell in a legal morass. I had to be careful about things like that, these days. Taking the crown had brought nearly as many complications as it had solutions. As an awkward compromise they'd been made into a guild, approved by my seal, the head of which was Masego. In his absence it was Fadila who ran things as his appointed second, with just enough independence she could do whatever needed to be done while the fact that the Observatory was the crown's property meant Anne Kendall had enough authority to step in if things got out of hand.

I pushed aside the thoughts as I tread one of the pebbled paths to the centre of the room, where Masego awaited. A second smaller ring of granite had been laid there, but it could hardly be seen. From the dark waters grew a massive alder tree whose roots spread into every pool and whose summit rose to touch the ceiling of painted runes and night sky. There was nothing natural about it, from the overly pale bark to the almost crimson leaves. Growing from the trunk a handful of branches formed a structure halfway between a bed and a seat, and before it a depression in the trunk made room for an item pulsing with power. It didn't look like much to the naked eye, a wide bowl of baked clay whose supports were shaped like men and devils supporting the rim. It'd taken Archer the better part of a month to find it and get it out of the ruins of Liesse, but I'd never seriously considered leaving the scrying artefact of the Sahelians among the wreck no matter the difficulties. Once Akua's discreet trump card, it was now the heart of the Observatory. In the wooden seat before it, Masego was laying down and looking half-asleep. I could see his pupils moving beneath the black eyecloth, but aside from that Hierophant was eerily still.

He'd lost weight again, I saw as I got closer. Even now that Fadila was under strict instructions to make sure he ate he still spent most hours of the days and night in that seat and rarely moved unless he was forced to. I almost hesitated to touch him, for he tended to be confused for a bit when wrenched out of his scrying. The decision was made for me, in the end. The branches above rustled, and someone casually tossed a sloppily sculpted wooden duck at his forehead. He wrenched back to Creation with a yelp as Archer emerged from the foliage dangling upside down.

"Evening, Cat," she grinned. "Congratulations, you're getting invaded."

I considered this, then smiled back.

"Evening, Indrani," I said, and wrenched her down to splash noisily in a pool.

Eyes turning to Masego, who looked only half-here even now, I sighed.

"Tell me everything," I ordered.

Chapter 2

Alarm

> "In conclusion, the court recognizes the desertion of the sentient tiger army raised by Dread Emperor Sorcerous as sufficient precedent to rule that tapirs can, in fact, commit treason but that lack of sentience bars them from laying claim to the Tower by right of usurpation."
>
> Official transcript from the Trial of Unexpected Teeth, which resulted in the execution of the man-eating tapirs that devoured Dread Empress Atrocious

The mist had come out of the clay pot and formed a mirror-like surface in front of us without any need for visible prompting. Even as Archer loudly cussed me out and dragged herself out of the pool like a hissing wet cat, my eyes went to the images that had bloomed across solidified must. Massive was the first word that came to mind. Masego had somehow raised the perspective to high up in the sky, above the still-unfolding ritual, and only vague memories of how large that mountain range stood otherwise allowed to grasp the scale of what was being done. It was deceptively simple, at first look. Some kind of white fire was being used to carve a passage across the Whitecaps from the Principate to Callow. It was difficult to put a finger on the exact size of the passage from this perspective, but I'd gauge as broad enough for two large carriages to pass simultaneously without getting too close. Hierophant had taken the moments I spent looking at his scrying to gather himself. I could tell from the way his breath was steadying and his heartbeat calming.

"I will begin by clarifying this is a ritual and not the making of an artefact," the blind mage said.

"Afternoon, Masego," I said. "How are you doing? I'm doing great myself, thanks for asking."

He cast me a dubious look.

"I would have thought that the obvious precursor to an invasion would spoil your mood," he said.

"She's being sarcastic, Zeze," Archer said.

She got close enough to me before shaking off the wet that my entire left side was made dripping. She was a charmer, our Indrani.

"Ah," Hierophant said. "Is that entirely necessary?"

I sighed, if only to prevent my sharpening worry from showing. A few months ago he would have caught that. Spending his days strapped to the Observatory's central device looked like it might be unmaking years of progress. I needed to keep a closer eye on him, force him to talk with actual people once in a while. I knew Archer broke the wards protecting this place with chagrining regularity to come pester him, but that alone obviously wasn't enough.

"Not an artefact, you said," I said. "I thought those were pretty small by definition."

"Liesse as rebuilt by Diabolist would be considered an artefact under most accepted definitions," he noted. "It certainly served a sorcerous purpose."

Mildly interesting, but not the kind of edification I was currently after.

"Ritual," I repeated. "I was under the impression Procer doesn't usually have the chops for those. You've been pretty dismissive about their mages whenever we discuss threat assessments."

"Eh, the Lady says the same thing," Archer said. "She always told us Proceran wizards are nothing to worry about unless they're Named. Apparently their kind's not real popular with the powers that be in the west."

"The Principate has been consistently at least a generation behind the Empire in matters of sorcery for centuries," Masego said, almost sneering. "No other nation has even half their number of hedge practitioners and even their 'finest' still ascribe to the Jaquinite theory of magic. It tells in their work here, Catherine. It is amateurish in everything but scale."

I wrinkled my nose at the sight of the white flame burning through rock. It hadn't moved in a while, I noted. Was something messing with our scrying?

"I was going to ask you when they'd be done, but they don't seem to be moving," I said.

"Performance issues," Archer suggested. "I mean, if they're going to wave around a big fire dick it's only fitting."

Oh Gods, now that she'd put the image in my head I couldn't unsee it. Fucking Hells, Indrani.

"That is planned," Masego said vaguely. "And the reason is... ah, there we are."

I raised an eyebrow and it kept rising when I saw half a mountain's worth of snow and stone collapse into the flame. Avalanche. *They'll only start moving when they're sure the passage wont be clogged*, I thought.

"It is not fire," Hierophant suddenly said. "They are... um, the structure seems based on a miracle? *Fascinating*."

I whistled sharply.

"Focus, Zeze," I said. "We're at war."

"And I have another wooden duck," Archer added cheerfully.

He seemed a lot more concerned by Indrani's announcement than mine, but then she'd been spending a lot of time with him. I doubted it was the first time a shitty wooden carving ended up bouncing off his forehead, knowing them both as I did.

"Dispersal of matter," Hierophant said. "That is the nature of the working employed."

"The passage smokes after they clear it," I pointed out.

"Because they are sloppy," he disdainfully said. "Their spell formula is inexact, thus the dispersal causes the release of heat. Had they done it properly their army could be walking behind the front but they're *Jaquinite*s, Catherine. The man was a priest. I'm pleasantly surprised they didn't just kneel down to *pray* the passage would happen on its own."

"Let's not even speak about that," I grimaced. "With the amount of heroes they've assembled, I wouldn't call that too much of a stretch to take place."

"Praying," Archer drawled. "By far the least interesting thing that can follow someone getting on their knees."

I shot her a look. Indrani really needed a roll in the hay, didn't she? My court was packed with attractive men and women around my eye these days – and Gods Below, that Talbot thought he was being subtle really was the most insulting part of that – so the fact that she hadn't dragged anyone into her rooms yet was starting to warrant a conversation.

"They've mastered the basics of scrying, at least," Masego conceded. "It's why they're forging a pass instead of a tunnel even if it risks avalanches."

"Wait, I know that one," I said. "Scrying doesn't work underground. Or across tall obstacles."

"An oversimplification on both counts," Hierophant told me. "The Greyfang Range-"

"The Whitecaps," I corrected him.

The glass orbs that were his eyes shifted under the cloth in what was likely the reflex of a blink without the physical ability to do one.

"That is not their name in Imperial atlases," he said.

"The Empire doesn't have a city next to them either," I replied.

"That is not how atlases work, Catherine," he plaintively said.

"I thought they were called the Parish," Archer contributed, because never once in her life had she seen a fire without reaching for a jug of oil.

"That's the Proceran name for them," I grunted. One of them, anyway. "Whitecaps. Moving on."

"There's mushrooms called that," Hierophant mutinously said under his breath.

"But not capitalized," I pointed out.

If there was one thing to love about Masego, it was that he could easily be side tracked by technicalities. I was getting fairly good at that, these days. His expression brightened and he nodded. From the corner of my eye I saw Archer looking at me amusedly.

"The Whitecaps are a too broad a range to penetrate through blindly," Hierophant said, picking up where I'd interrupted.

"Yeah, penetrating blindly never helps," Indrani agreed, voice choked up.

"You're bargaining for another visit to the pond," I whispered at her.

"I'll be good," Archer whispered back, hands raised and her vulpine grin immediately betraying the lie.

"They're adjusting with scrying," Masgeo said, blithely unaware of the background chatter. "The entire array is a backwards mess, however. They likely have to communicate adjustments by *voice*."

I consciously refrained from asking what the alterative to speaking was.

"Can you tell me when the ritual will be done?" I asked, then winced. "Never mind, don't answer that. Can you tell me when you *think* the ritual will be done?"

Hierophant's mouth closed over this initial answer, then he took a moment to consider.

"Assuming there are fewer than five avalanches," he said. "And that the pool of accumulated power they're using does not run out... Two days. Going into three. It depends on the amount of practitioners they've gathered. Serving as guide for so large a working will be exhausting. If they've fewer than three hundred mages some will begin to die or birth derangements before nightfall."

I worried my lip. Worst case, two days. Actually crossing the passage would take them longer. A week before the first troops were in Callow? No, shorter if they used cavalry for the vanguard. Which I would, in their place. The Order of Broken Bells had swelled, but it was still just a fraction of the horse the Principate could bring to bear. Imperial spy reports and what the Jacks had managed to compile had the host waiting in Arans around fifty thousand strong. The commanders weren't supposed to be anything too worrying, a Prince Milenan and his allies none of who had notable military achievements under their belt from the civil war. They were the First Prince's primary opposition within Procer, though, so I suspected she would not be shy about spending their lives to damage my position. Even if I pulled together every part of my armies in Callow – which I couldn't, not without leaving my borders with Praes and the Free Cities dangerously bare – the invaders still outnumber me a little less than two to one. I'd have what Juniper called a qualitative edge, considering most my soldiers were professionals while a lot of theirs would be levies, but the core of that army was principality troops. Varying shades of light cavalry and professional heavy infantry. Those would be a hard nut to crack, and that was without even considering the fucking battalion of heroes reports placed in the war camp. It would take me at least two days to have the Army of Callow ready for a march, and that was just the part in the permanent camps near Laure. Taking them through Arcadia was spinning the wheel, but we'd made tests. For that kind of distance, the average was eight days. Going as low as six and high as fifteen.

"I don't suppose you could shut down the ritual?" I asked Masego.

He shook his head.

"They are not using their own sorcery to do this, Catherine," he elaborated. "A receptacle was forged and what must be hundreds of practitioners poured their own magic into for years to create the reservoir they are now employing. It would be like trying to put out a bonfire by spitting on it."

"And if I gave you every mage in Laure to work on a ritual?" I pressed.

He considered it seriously.

"No," he finally said. "If we had caught their ritual before it began in earnest, perhaps, but no longer. Considering the distance it would be insufficient to do anything but slow it a few hours. And even that would come at great cost."

"You're going at this wrong," Archer said. "Let them make their hole. After they're spent, prevent them from using it."

I looked at her suspiciously.

"You're not usually this helpful," I said.

"I'm a woman of many layers," Indrani haughtily replied.

I had a fairly scathing comment to offer involving onions and how she should perhaps bathe more often but the grass was cut under my feet.

"You mean attacking them as they pass," Hierophant said, tone musing. "That is a possibility. Triggering further avalanches from Laure is possible, with sufficient preparations."

"You don't sound enthused," I said.

"While their practitioners are a backwards lot, I do not believe them to be actual imbeciles," Masego said. "At least one of them was clever enough to conceive of this ritual."

I frowned.

"You think they'll have protections," I guessed.

"If they do not disperse the wizards they have massed to carry this out, they have the ability to resist anything I would seriously consider using against them," Hierophant said. "Three hundred blunderers with a heavy club are dangerous even to someone of my proficiency."

Throwing bodies at the problem, huh. Well, the Principate had no lack of those to swear into service. It wasn't an elegant solution, but I was living proof that sometimes hitting things really hard could be enough to pull through.

"They'll have priests, too," Archer said. "The robed rats are everywhere in Procer."

Brothers and Sisters of the House of Light swore oaths that prevented them from taking lives, but there'd always been a lot of wiggling room left to interpret how that should be carried out. Priests were a historical staple of Callowan hosts, to shut down sorceries and heal wounded soldiers. And there were always a few to be found who were willing to make an exception about that whole no killing thing and repent afterwards. Turning miracles against an avalanche sent down by an Evil mage wouldn't even require them to do some rhetorical

footwork afterwards. *And let's not forget the House of Light in Procer is a different creature than the Callowan one.* The Fairfaxes had always kept the House out of the crown's affairs, but in Procer the priests were influential power brokers. It would be safe to assume they'd be involved, and that was the final nail in the coffin of considered magical intervention. If we couldn't head them off at the pass, it'd have to be in the field. And odds were they'd get close to Harrow before I could get my army up north.

"Masego," I said quietly, pitching my voice so none of the guild mages would overhear. "The Hell Egg up north, have you managed to find it?"

"I am still awaiting answer from the Tower about consulting the private histories," the blind man replied.

My lips thinned. The Empress had been quite willing to share reports from the Eyes about the unfolding situation on Procer and beyond, but my people were being given polite brush-offs and non-answers when it came to pretty much everything else. I couldn't tell whether that was pressure she was applying to bring me back under her thumb or that in her eyes I now only counted as something to be tossed at the crusade to blunt its advance. The former gave me room to deal, especially now that the invasion had begun. The latter would mean my situation was even more precarious than I currently believed it to be. Her people would be in touch soon enough, I reflected. Cold as the diplomatic exchanges had become, a Proceran offensive would thaw them a great deal. Especially since I doubted that the northern crusader army would be moving alone. Odds were the host in the south under Prince Papenheim was preparing for a run at the Vales. Black wouldn't be easy meat, especially not with Scribe and Warlock at his side. But he was starkly outnumbered, and he'd be in no position to do anything but hold the valleys for months to come. At the moment, the Empress needed me.

"I thought Ratface was supposed to be some kind of bureaucratic wizard," Archer said, eyeing me sideways.

She was sharper than Masego about these things, regardless of her vocal disinterest in matters of intrigue. I nodded discreetly and she grimaced. Yeah, I wasn't happy either that it was quite possible instructions had come down from Malicia to make it much harder for me to locate the fucking demon that was supposed to be bound somewhere in northern Callow.

"Have you narrowed down what kind of a demon it is?" I tried.

"It cannot be Corruption," Hierophant said. "That was my initial theory, when we last spoke of the subject in Marchford, but that particular entity has since been found and fought. It might very well be Absence, Catherine. That would be. . . "

"Balls," Archer helpfully provided.

Masego frowned.

"Genitalia has nothing to-"

"Bad, it'd be bad," I interrupted before this could turn into a full-blown squabble.

I clenched my fingers.

"I don't like the shape of it," I admitted. "That many Named, near a threat unaccounted for?"

It wasn't a guarantee that a brawl with heroes would end up letting it loose, but the odds were high enough it couldn't be discounted. But if catching the crusaders before they reached Harrow wasn't an option, then the alternative was ceding most the barony before giving battle. I would much prefer not doing that, and not only because of the military implications of giving the enemy a fortified city to operate from. It wouldn't look good within Callow either. People had been willing to tighten their belts if it was for rebuilding the kingdom and raising armies to defend it. If I was seen to have failed in either regard, there would be consequences. *But if the choice is between that and rolling the dice with a demon...* I needed to talk with Juniper. Archer and Hierophant were here with me in Laure and the last time I'd spoken with Thief she'd said she should be back within a few days, but Hakram was still in Vale trying to coax the refugees out of the tent cities and back behind stone walls. I might have to leave him behind when marching.

"Tell Fadila to keep a full roster tonight," I told Masego. "I'll need to speak to the baronies up north."

And half a dozen other people, since Adjutant wasn't there to do it for me.

"We getting ready for war, then?" Archer asked, and there was a pleased glint in her eyes.

"I'd prefer not to," I said. "But the choice is out of my hands. Wrap up anything you have going on, Masego. When we go on the offensive you're coming with us."

He pouted. I blamed Indrani for teaching him that, it was surprisingly effective even now that his face had lost most of the baby fat.

"I'm not hearing anything otherwise," I firmly told him. "Look on the bright side, Hierophant. Odds are you'll be taking a close look at that passage soon enough."

"There is that," he conceded, but it was half-hearted.

I cast a look at Archer, who smiled back and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. It was telling that I barely even noticed when she did that nowadays.

"If you run into Thief, send her my way," I told her.

She waved in a manner that could vaguely be interpreted as agreement. About as good as I could expect. I clapped her on the shoulder, reminded Masego we were nearing supper time and made my exit. I had one last thing to do before mustering for war, after all. Tonight was the night for my little monthly chat with the enemy.

Cordelia Hasenbach had just begun her invasion of Callow, so we should have a few things to talk about.

Chapter 3

Chat

> "I must say, Chancellor, you've become quite the conversationalist."
>
> Dread Empress Maledicta II

The room had been a gaol, once upon a time. Not one the Fairfaxes ever owned up to having, but the ruling dynasty of Callow had not remained on the throne by being faint-hearted. Unlike the luxurious prison that was the Songbird's Cage, this was a dark and ugly pit. Not the kind of place you sent someone if you ever expected them to come out. The late and unlamented Governor Mazus had apparently used it as dumping grounds for people he believed would cause more terror by being disappeared than known dead, and expanded what had once been a single pair of rooms to a large underground complex of seven. I'd had it sealed off before my coronation, and not a soul was allowed here now. Bare stone walls surrounded me, cleared of manacles, and the only ornament was the seat I'd brought down here myself. I closed the steel door behind me and froze it shut before taking a deep breath. Winter came easy.

It always did.

Ice crept across the walls hungrily, gaping maws of frost that devoured every nook and cranny until all that was left was a hall of glittering mirrors. It'd been as difficult as snapping a finger, and there was a part of me that delighted in using the might of my mantle. But then the world sharpened. Grew jagged. I could feel, with dim horror, everything that I was begin to calcify. To set in immovable stones. That would have been dangerous enough, but I was not merely fae. My title was Winter's and Winter knew nothing as intimately as darkness and hunger. I sat down on the chair and forced myself to think as little as I could. It was almost cowardly, but I'd rather not have to confront the kind of thoughts that would surface if I pondered anything too deeply in this state. Gods, I could use a drink. The alcohol was one of the few things that blunted the edges of this. That made me feel like I was still human. But even if I'd been willing to embrace that crutch right now, I could not. Hakram had, before he left, exacted an oath from me.

Never while on campaign, or attending affairs of state. The oath was to end with our reunion, whenever that may be. Adjutant had expressed... worries to me in private, twice now. I'd been irritated, considering Indrani drank like a fish and no one ever lectured *her*, but he was right in that Archer wasn't wearing a crown. Unlike me. The sharpness of the ache for a cup in my hand was whispering to me that Hakram might just have been right. He did have that nasty habit, didn't he? I breathed in and out slowly, then reached for the power again. This had been an aspect, once. Fall. Now it was just a part of me, true as hair or toes. When it'd been crystallized into a single word it'd been stronger – no perhaps not that, simply more *rigid* – but whatever had been lost was more than made up by the breadth of what I could now achieve with this power. Before, I would never have been able to forge this half-world I was now painting over the room with brushstrokes of night. The threshold of my domain, the thought came, forged of instinct and inhuman certainty. I bit my lip, strong enough to draw blood.

Pain, that most human of sensations. It cleared out some of the ice and I let out a relieved breath. I had to see to myself before the First Prince graced me with her presence. That and play the card up my sleeve.

"I grant you leash," I said, voice echoing. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

With a throaty chuckle Akua Sahelian's shade stepped out of the Mantle of Woe. Even in this half-death, she remained beautiful. High cheekbones and perfectly styled eyebrows, her dress of red and gold tightly clinging to curves I could only envy. The only thing marring that beauty was the gaping bloody hole in her chest where I'd ripped out her heart.

"Freedom," the Diabolist mused. "Limited, but then is that not true of all freedoms?"

"Now that I've let you out of the lamp," I said, "for the first of my three wishes I would like peace for Calernia."

She cast me a disapproving looks.

"You know very well that djinn do not grant wishes," she said. "That is mere Callowan ignorance."

"You make a terrible genie, Akua," I told her. "I'm going to trade you for a lantern one of these days, you know? They're about as useful and *they* don't talk back."

"Your insistence on levity is a mark of poor breeding, dearest," she said. "You must overcome it."

I had a few less than polite things to reply to that with, including a reminder that if she was so clever she wouldn't have ended up sown into my collar, but it would have to wait. I could feel my guest arriving. The darkness shivered, and just like that the First Prince sat across from me. I'd not been sure that she'd bite when I sent Thief with the amulet I'd woven strands of my domain into, but to my pleasure she had. She was covered with so many miracles she almost glowed and she was very careful never to leave her seat, but she was here

anyway. Hasenbach was not a reckless woman by nature, by my reckoning, but I knew exactly why she'd taken the risk to venture into even the outskirts of my domain: the Augur. How deeply that woman's visions ran was still a subject of much speculation across the whole Empire, but I'd banked on her being able to tell I genuinely had no intention of turning this into a trap. I needed the First Prince too badly to ever consider taking her life, even if it'd been possible. There was a moment of silence, as the Proceran gathered her bearings. I said nothing, patiently waiting.

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Salia, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man. Quite a mouthful of titles for a woman who was only twenty-six years old and had become the sovereign ruler of the largest – and arguably most powerful – nation on Calernia before the age of twenty. This was likely as close to meeting in person as we'd ever come, so as always I took a moment to study her. She was impeccably clothed in dark blue I'd been told was part of the heraldry of her home principality Rhenia, the dress rather conservative but still flattering to her frame. It made her shoulders look slimmer, I thought. Hasenbach was best known for her skill as a diplomat, but she'd been born with a warrior's frame. Her long golden hair cascaded down her neck in perfect ringlets, needing no ornament but their own richness, but there was a discreet touch of golden eye shadow that made her blue eyes stand out even more vividly. On her brow was a circlet of white gold, tastefully understated considering the power it represented. I'd seen beautiful women in my day, some hauntingly so, and honestly would not count the First Prince among them. She was not plain, not exactly, but all the most striking parts of her appearance were careful artifice.

That did nothing to detract from her presence, even in this half-realm of mine. Though seated on a mere cushioned and sculpted chair, she radiated that... something. The unspoken pull that surrounded people like Black and Malicia, or even Juniper. That spark that made the weight they bore into something that dragged others into their orbit. No, she was not someone to ever underestimate. The more I learned about her ascension to the throne and the years that had followed, the warier I was becoming of her. The pit of vipers she ruled was as deadly as the Imperial court in many ways, and she'd retained rule of it without having a cudgel like Black to call on. She met my eyes, but did not speak. Akua softly laughed, walking around the First Prince's silhouette with the grace of a cat before leaning her head over the Proceran's shoulder.

"She will never speak first, my heart," the shade of my most hated enemy said. "It would be improper, you see. Her people believe that First Prince is the greatest of all titles, and so she must never be first to offer courtesy."

I inclined my head towards Hasenbach.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I said, voice calm.

"Your Grace," Cordelia Hasenbach replied.

The proper address was 'Your Majesty', though never once had she referred

to me as such. The etiquette she employed recognized me as noble, though at best one of equal standing with any of the many princes of the Procer.

"Look at how her lip curls around the words, Catherine," Akua laughed, moving around the unseeing First Prince to better study her. "She would prefer not to grant you them at all, but she must – and *how* it displeases her. To call you queen would be recognition of your legitimacy, and end to her crusade's own. But to deny you any title at all would make any negotiation between you worthless."

Akua rose, stretching languidly.

"And she needs you to keep speaking to her, my lovely," the monster said silkily. "Oh yes. Even should you never come to terms, to be able to gauge you with her own eyes is priceless advantage."

Diabolist had grown increasingly fond of using endearments with me, since I'd ripped out her heart and stolen her soul. Fucking Praesi. Fucking highborn, really.

"Let's begin with the usual," I said. "Terms?"

"Unchanged," the First Prince replied. "Immediate abdication and disbanding of your armies. Your soldiery to undergo fair trial after the crusade. Yourself and no more than five of your comrades allowed exile without pursuit, under condition of never returning to Callow."

I hummed, and idly reached for my pipe. I used the process of stuffing it with wakeleaf and striking a match as a deferral of answer to allow me to gather my thoughts. I'd half-expected Hasenbach to offer starker terms now that she'd struck the first blow and begun crossing into Callow catching me flat-footed.

"Do you feel that?" Akua murmured. "That is *caution*, dearest. She does not harden terms of surrender because she fears you. What you might do if cornered. Use that fear, Catherine. It is the sharpest prick of the mantle you claimed."

I puffed at my pipe and let out a stream of smoke, making myself more comfortable in my seat.

"I'll have to decline, for now," I said.

Akua was useful, too useful to shove back into the box right now, but more for her perceptiveness than her advice. The terms remained unacceptable. Abdication would be a relief, to be honest, and something that was going to happen regardless if my plans came to fruition. But not like this. I couldn't trust a crusader tribunal to pass sentence on the Praesi under my command, much less the greenskins. And that the First Prince and her allies would be deciding Callow's fate without a single check on their decisions was the least acceptable part of it all.

"You are calmer than I expected," Hasenbach said. "The dossiers we have of you led me to expect conversation of a harsher tone."

Akua clucked her tongue.

"Do not let her turn this towards you, my heart," she advised. "Any answer at all will be revealing in ways you cannot control. That is too dangerous a woman to be given the lay of your thoughts."

I inclined my head, agreeing with Akua while masquerading it as acquiescence with the First Prince's sentence.

"I've been reading about the Principate, lately," I said. "About how it functions in practice."

The First Prince smiled, as if she were sharing a drink with an old friend.

"Interesting," she said. "And have you come to any conclusions?"

"It doesn't," I bluntly said. "Function, that is. The fault line in Procer's foundation has been made exceedingly clear over the last twenty years."

Not so much as a speck of emotion crossed the First Prince's face. Akua laughed delightedly.

"See how her brow stiffened, Catherine?" she said. "That is anger, my lovely. The recognition that the Empress' game was no great plot. That all her people ever needed to claw each other bloody was means and excuse. Feed that wroth. That is the only way for you to glimpse truth behind the mask."

Praesi diplomacy, I was learning, was more like a pit fight with slightly pulled punches than anything I'd recognize. It was all about testing the other side, making them blink and then capitalizing on that weakness. That Akua could not recognize tussling like that with Cordelia godsdamned Hasenbach was a bad idea was a good reminder that for all her cleverness the Diabolist had heavy blinders. That was the rotten heart that always made the designs of the High Lords collapse: they could not ever conceive that they were sometimes in the inferior bargaining position. Fortunately, I'd learned that lesson early when I grew up with the Tower's boot over my throat. *No doubt I have blinders of my own*, I thought. *But if I knew they'd hardly be blinders, would they?*

"Not overly surprising conclusion, given the manner in which you have ruled," the First Prince said. "For all that your throne is in Laure, you have adopted many of the manners of the East."

Ruled, I noted, not reigned. How carefully she always picked her words.

"Don't misunderstand me," I said. "I'm not touting the Tower as an alternative, or even how I've been running things. I just grafted Praesi bureaucracy to the court, and it's a clunky solution. But I've gotten my hands on a history of the League Wars, and it's not a pretty story."

Akua clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

"This is the chorus of the losing side, dearest," she chided me. "Beneath the dignity of one who triumphed over me."

It was a small shift, but I saw Hasenbach's eyes brighten with interest after I spoke. I'd been careful, during our little talks, to try to find common grounds. Something we could discuss and disagree over without it getting personal. So far, what had worked best was Proceran history. I wasn't reading those books solely because I no longer needed to sleep, or even to get an idea of my opponent's weaknesses.

"You refer to the Right of Iron," she said. "I would, in fact, tend to agree with you in this matter. The prerogative of waging war without the agreement of the First Prince has been the source of much trouble over the centuries."

"So why haven't you tried to revoke it?" I asked, genuinely curious. "I know that'd have to go through the Highest Assembly and that means a vote, but just after your civil war people were sick enough of the killing you would have had a decent chance of pushing it through."

"I considered this," the First Prince admitted. "Yet in doing so, I would have created cohesive opposition to any further reform. Many of which are, as you have said, direly needed."

"That opposition you're talking about," I said. "They're the exact same people that spent nearly twenty years ravaging the Principate on Malicia's pay."

"A generalization," Hasenbach said. "One with some shade of accuracy, I will concede, yet there is important difference in having been funded by the Empress and having sought to do her bidding."

I acknowledged the point with a nod. From the corner of my eye I saw Akua meandering away from the First Prince, coming to stand at my back. Even knowing she was powerless, utterly at my mercy, having her behind me was raising the hair on my neck.

"What I'm wondering is – why listen to them at all?" I asked. "I saw the Imperial estimates for the remaining armies after the Battle of Aisne. There wasn't a force in the Principate that could have stood against you, if you'd twisted their arms into backing your reforms. And I don't mean the small ones, I mean *everything*."

"You were taught," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "by two of the most brutal tyrants in living memory. That is not your fault, though your embrace of their methods remains your sole responsibility. That is why your perspective on the subject is tainted. I did not attempt to make myself an absolute monarch because I believe such a manner of ruling to be dangerously flawed."

"If you count civil wars, Procer's been on the field more often than any other nation on Calernia," I pointed. "That includes *Praes*, Your Highness."

"You blame this on lack of centralized authority," the First Prince said. "That is not entirely inaccurate, yet you miss the central tenet of the Principate: it is, unlike Praes, a nation built on consensus. The Highest Assembly is prone to squabbles, and inefficient. This I will not deny. That is because it is not an institution meant to empower the office of the First Prince, it is meant to *check* it. No single man or woman should ever be able to wield the full, unrestricted might of the Principate."

"Now," Akua whispered into my ear. "Now is when you slide the knife."

I smiled pleasantly.

"Then why," I asked, "is the host crossing into Callow made up almost entirely by your opposition in the Assembly?"

The shutters went down on the First Prince's face, even as I pulled at my pipe and allowed smoke to stream out of my nostrils. *This*, I thought, *moments*

like this. They're why I let you out of the box, Akua. I had much to learn from Diabolist, when it came to this kind of game.

"She did not expect you to understand her intent," Akua said, still at my side. "Watch the eyes, how she reconsiders the kind of threat you pose. She thought you a dull thug, a brute of a child with a stolen crown. Now she wonders if you've taken as much from these talks as she has, and it *worries* her."

The shade laughed.

"Do not talk," she said. "Let her silence damn her more the longer it stretches."

I spat out another mouthful of smoke, studying the First Prince. When she finally spoke, her tone was perfectly calm.

"I am forced to wonder," Hasenbach said, "what game it is you truly play, Catherine Foundling."

"The only game I've ever ever played," I said. "Keeping my people's head above the waterline."

"Yet you ally with monsters and murderers," the First Prince said. "The very same whose fellows committed the single greatest massacre of Callowans since the days of Dread Empress Triumphant."

"May she never return," Akua murmured.

"I'm also talking with you," I said. "The thing is, Your Highness, that right now the Tower's my only possible bedfellow. I can't take your crusade on my own."

Not entirely true. Juniper was the opinion that if I was willing to let most of Callow burn while I struck deep in crusader territory, I might be able to force a draw by sheer dint of massacre. She'd played out the theory with her general staff. No part of that path was acceptable to me, though. I was not willing to pile up the bodies until no one was able to keep going. If I was ever forced to that, well... Better to abdicate. And to backstab Praes as brutally as I could beforehand, so that the crusade ended quickly and not in Callow.

"A villain ruling over Callow is not an acceptable outcome for this war," the First Prince said.

"People I don't trust in the slightest deciding what happens to Callow isn't either," I frankly replied. "If I have to cut a deal, I'd rather do it with you than Malicia. After Liesse... Well, if this is the best I can expect from the Empire, the Empire's not an entity I can trust to uphold their part of a deal."

"Trust has nothing do with it," Akua dismissed. "You have power enough that the Empress cannot cross you lightly. Treaties are only ever gilding added to the deeper truth of power, dearest. This one does not consider you of sufficient might to treat with."

"Trust," Hasenbach said, her tone almost amused.

"Trust," I echoed.

The First Prince smiled.

"Did you never pause to wonder, Your Grace, why the only powers willing to deal with you are monstrous?" she asked softly.

My jaw clenched.

"Did you never wonder if you *belong* amongst that number?"

My fingers tightened.

"Careful now," Diabolist warned. "She goads you not by accident."

The urge was there to lash out. To remind that sanctimonious fucking Proceran that her own hands were far from clean. She'd sent out her enemies for me to savage, and her reasons for starting this crusade weren't nearly as squeaky clean as she'd like her allies to believe. She'd played the shadow game with Malicia for over a decade, too, and there's wasn't a person in Creation who'd manage to get through that without some mud on their shoes. Why were her killings less a sin than mine? Because she went to the House of Light for sermons and paid her alms? Because her intentions were some kind of nebulous greater good? Hells, so were mine. Instead I took a deep breath. Slowly, I raised my pipe and pulled at the dragonbone shaft. The wakeleaf no longer brought the sharp focus it once had, but the act itself was soothing.

"I have," I admitted quietly, "utterly failed Callow."

Whatever answer she'd expected, it had not been that. The flicker of surprise in her eyes did not lie. I felt Akua begin to speak, but I no longer had need of her services. All it took was an exertion of will and back into the collar she went. Blind and deaf and furious.

"After First Liesse, when the Ruling Council was formed," I said. "No, even before that. When I did not answer Akua Sahelian being named governess with gathering an army and hanging her from the nearest tree. I betrayed everything I had set out to do the moment I allowed a woman I knew a cold butcher to be the steward of Callowan lives for the sake of political expediency."

I'd had months, now, of sleepless nights. Of going back over everything I'd done. Thinking of the paths I could have taken that didn't result in a hundred thousand of my people dead. And there had been so very many of them, hadn't there?

"I fucked up the Ruling Council," I acknowledged. "I had the leverage to make real changes, the same kind I've been saying I want to achieve since I was a girl, and instead I let a council stacked with High Lord cronies run Callow for me. And then got furious when they acted the same way Praesi always have, the moment I wasn't there to make them afraid. I've been complicit through inaction or ignorance in every catastrophe that struck Callow since the moment I got power and did absolutely nothing with it."

The First Prince watched me in silence, her face unreadable.

"I could make excuses," I said. "That I was ill-prepared for that kind of authority. That I spent so much time and spilled so much blood getting on top I forgot *why* I wanted to be there in the first place. But that'd be hypocritical, wouldn't it? I was given exactly what I clamoured for, and when I got it a city was turned into a graveyard. Hells, it's on my fucking standard: justifications matter only to the just. I started out with the intention of burying anyone who tossed around sentences like that in a shallow grave, but now I'm the one

having them sown on battle flags. Second Liesse made it clear that I've slowly crawled into being the kind of person I swore I was going to remove."

"And yet," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "you still wear the crown and muster your armies for war. Sentiment is only meaningful if followed by action. If your grief at all the woe you have caused changes nothing, it is merely self-pity."

"I know exactly what I have to do, Hasenbach," I said. "And letting you carve up Callow like side of pork isn't part of it. Not when the people doing the carving have no real incentive to care for the realm under the knife."

"Self-pity, then," Hasenbach said. "You still believe you can win this war."

"War," I said, "is the very opposite of what I'm after."

My pipe had finally gone out, I saw.

"We'll talk again," I told her, and the darkness collapsed.

I stayed in my seat for a long time, alone with my thoughts. *When does a lesser evil simply become an evil?* That was the line I needed to find, the one that could not be crossed. The moment where I became a greater wound than the one I was trying to prevent. I rose as the ice receded around me. It was going to be a long night.

They always were.

Chapter 4

Warpath

> "I'm not saying all your closest friends are shapeshifting devils I sent to spy on you after having the originals murdered, but I'm certainly implying it very heavily."
>
> Dread Emperor Traitorous, making small talk

"I think I might hate your people," Juniper growled.

The Hellhound was sprawled in her seat instead of sitting ramrod straight, a visible mark of how exhausted her duties had left her. A cup of orcish brew in hand – which I'd been oath-bound to decline when offered – she looked like a particularly grumpy green cat. Normally I'd be alarmed by the highest military officer in the kingdom professing hatred of its inhabitants, but I'd learned to read Juniper in our years together. That was a 'I can't believe I have to deal with this shit' growl, not a 'I won't need supper after I'm done with you' growl.

"Not even a month ago you were praising the quality of the foot you've been drilling," I pointed out.

"The soldiers are fine," the Marshal of Callow said. "Better than fine, even. They're taking to the formations better than I'd hoped, and they've got fire in the belly. But your *fucking* nobles, Catherine. Now was a bad time to pick to stop answering backtalk with gallows."

"Talbot can't be crawling up your ass," I frowned. "We sent him on manoeuvre out of the city specifically so he wouldn't be able to have his little meetings."

"His Regals are still knocking at my door," the orc said. "Foundling, if a single more hints at favours in exchange for an officer's commission there's going to be blood on the ground."

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot was more than just the head of the Order of Broken Bells, these days: he was also one of the founders of the tight-knight group of former aristocrats that had formed into one of my court's two major power blocs. They'd called themselves the Patriots, at first, but I'd made an idle comment to Talbot about how that reminded me of the Truebloods and that name had died an early death. Considering the most infamous member

of the Truebloods now had her soul sown into my collar, I could see why he'd taken that as a pointed hint. The Queen's Men were the counterweight, centred around Anne Kendall, but they had much fewer connections. A consequence of the fact that were made up mostly of guildsmen and aldermen.

The Regals weren't nearly as much of a nuisance as the people the northern baronies had sent to Laure, but they were also much smarter about how they were going about gaining influence. Instead of naked power grabs through trade they were placing men in the bureaucracy that had grown out of the court centred in Laure. The problem was that, often, their candidate was the most competent to be had. None of the Regals still had noble titles or privileges, Black had seen to that after the Liesse Rebellion, but several were still wealthy landowners. And their kinsmen were *educated*, which I was coming to prize most of all. Keeping their influence in check while making sure the cogs of the bureaucracy didn't get clogged with incompetence was like walking a tightrope. And it wasn't like I could hand every appointment to Anne's men instead, they were barely more trustworthy and they tended to heavily favour the interests of Laure and the guilds.

"They're still under the impression they can just buy commands?" I asked, surprised.

Juniper bared her teeth savagely.

"Of course not," she mocked. "They're simply recommending candidates for fast-tracked officer training. Every one of them above the cut. Every one of them someone's cousin or aunt."

My frown deepened. That was still overstepping.

"You know you have my full backing in this," I told her. "If there's anyone being too insistent. . . "

"They don't repeat, Catherine," Juniper sighed. "They always send another envoy, another candidate. And they're just important enough I can't foist them off on Aisha."

I grit my teeth. We were at war, now, the same war Juniper had been trying to prepare the kingdom for since she first got her baton. That she'd had to spend hours fending off ambitious Regals while trying to scrape together enough force to resist Procer was getting on my nerves more than a little bit. A measured expression of displeasure to these fine men and women was in order.

"I'll take care of it," I said. "But you know that's not what I'm here for."

She nodded soberly.

"We'll be ready to march half a day before predicted," the Hellhound said. "All we're waiting on is the Broken Bells. Hakram's provision office delivered the goods smooth as silk."

"Twenty thousand in whole then," I said, leaning back into my seat. "We're still outnumbered raw, Juniper."

Her lips split into a fanged grimace.

"If you'd not spent coin on shit like the Observatory-"

"We'd have heroes in the heartlands," I interrupted flatly. "Consider it an investment to ensure we didn't have to fight this war on more than one front."

She conceded the argument with an ill-humoured grunt.

"I can't answer for the heroes with the host, we don't have a clear enough assessment of what they can do," Juniper began.

"Thief should be back soon with what the Jacks managed to put together," I said. "But the army?"

"We can take them," the Hellhound said. "Don't get me wrong, it'll be bloody. But our army's in a much better shape than theirs. As long as we can bring them to battle on an open field, I believe we can beat them. Which is why I wish you'd reconsider Harrow. I can't promise anything for two to one and walls."

"Orders already went out," I reminded her. "Baroness Morley is emptying her stores and evacuating towards Hedges."

"The Proceran supply chain will be a nightmare when they've crossed," Juniper noted. "And without granaries and cattle to plunder they can't live off the land. So, all things aside, I agree with you there's a decent chance they'll be forced to continue pushing south or start eating faster than they can bring food. But if they don't everything goes out the window. I don't like that our plan is centred around the enemy doing what we want them to."

"There's too much of a risk involved in fighting them near Harrow, Juniper," I sighed. "Even if we could manage to get there in time, I won't engage when there's a Hell Egg unaccounted for in the region."

The north was one of the few parts of Callow that hadn't been devastated by the latest round of wars to hit the country. Not even a better strategic position was enough to have me take the risk of changing that.

"There's too much politics in this war, Foundling," my Marshal said. "Careful you miss the defeat in front of you for staring at the treaties on the horizon."

"We can't slaughter fifty thousand Procerans," I flatly said. "Aside from the brutal bounding our manpower would take in achieving that, it'd be impossible to make peace with Hasenbach afterwards."

"Hasenbach's invading us," the Hellhound retorted. "The high horse stops being that when you ride it to war. If she doesn't want dead soldiers, she has no business sending them to the field."

I knew that in speaking that she spoke as an orc. She had the bone-deep conviction that no one with a sword in hand had the right of complaining about death. And there was a lot about that way of looking at the world that appealed to me even now. But that was a seductive simplicity that'd become the kind of luxury I could no longer afford. If I offed half a hundred thousand Procerans, the Principate would be fighting this to the bitter end. The First Prince might very well get deposed if she suggested otherwise. I had to defeat the crusaders, force them out of Callow, but it couldn't be a massacre. Assuming I could even deliver one of those, which was quite an assumption given the number of Named on the other side.

"I still think we should have gone ahead with Bonfire," the orc spoke into the silence. "I understand why you refused, but-"

"Juniper," I said quietly. "I love you like a sister. You're one of the smartest women I've ever met. But trust me when I say that Bonfire would have been the end of us."

It'd begun as an exercise for her general staff. How to win against the crusade without Callow ever seeing combat? The answer had been crude, vicious, and horrifyingly popular among my high-ranking officers. Even Callowans. Only greenskins had been more vocal in their approval than my people. It was simple enough: instead of waiting for Procer to muster, I was to take twenty thousand men and a full siege train through Arcadia and emerge on the upper northern edge of Procer's coast. Then I'd burn my way south, city by city, until the Principate mustered an army to force me out. At which point I'd pass through Arcadia again, and emerge on the other side of the Principate. Rinse, repeat. Again and again until Procer collapsed from the inside. The death toll would have been... It didn't bear thinking about. It'd been the support the plan had found that surprised me. Hells, *Talbot* had spoken in favour. He'd 'mourned the loss of innocent lives, but if losses must be had better Proceran than Callowan.' I'd stomped the notion out of high command and not been gentle about it. Aside from the sickening mass slaughters Bonfire entailed, it would have made Callow the foremost enemy of every Calernian nation. It had not escaped my notice that my ability to take hosts through Arcadia might be seen as as dangerous a weapon as the Diabolist's gate-device, in its own way. I had to use it sparingly and responsibly or we'd all pay for it. The thought came, uneasily, that we might regardless of what I did.

"Your call to make, Warlord," the orc acknowledged.

Silence lingered for a while afterwards, the two of us alone in her tent.

"Finally back at it," the Hellhound finally mused, and there was something like savage glee shining in her eyes.

"We march West, once more," I spoke in Mthethwa.

I was quoting an old verse Nauk loved. He'd spoken it years ago, before we left for the Liesse Rebellion.

"Waging the same old war," Juniper finished, and she met my gaze.

Neither of us finished the verse, though we both knew the words.

Onwards to the fields of Callow,

Swift death and graves shallow.

—

It was past midnight when I finally allowed myself a break. There was only so much time I could spend learning Reitz without wanting to jump off the balcony I was currently leaning against. It was important I learn, though. I'd have interpreters with me on the field, but going to war with the Principate without even understanding their languages was a weakness tailored to cause blunders. Still, I'd never missed my old aspect of Learn more. Hells, it wasn't like I'd been lazy when it came to learning languages. Aside from the Lower

Miezan of my childhood I spoke four others well, though my Old Tongue was still admittedly sloppier than the rest. It was enough for tonight, I decided. Back to the histories after that. I'd gotten my hands on an Ashuran chronicle of the Humbling of Titans, the abortive and bloody war between Procer and the Titanomachy that had sown the seeds of hate between the nations that still held to this day. Writings from the Thalassocracy were slightly less inclined to paint Procer in a bad light than those of Praes or the Free Cities, though from what little I'd read there wasn't much defensible about why and how the Principate had waged that war. I looked up at the stars and allowed the wind to stream across my face. It was a cool breeze, not that I'd notice unless I forced myself to.

"*Finally*," Thief crowed from behind me.

I almost lashed out by reflex, Winter coiling in my veins, but I let out a steamy breath instead.

"That game's gotten a lot more dangerous than it used to be," I told her, voice sounding with just the hint of an echo.

Vivienne leaned against the railing next to me, blowing away an errant strand with a mischievous smile.

"Just like you to say that when I start winning," she said.

"Welcome back, Thief," I sighed, and put an arm around her shoulder in the distant cousin of a hug.

She only squirmed a little. Vivienne had never been a touchy sort but compared to, say, Masego she was neediness incarnate. I released her after a heartbeat, and pretended not to notice the slightly pleased smile on her face.

"So I hear we have a Proceran problem on the march," she said.

"They won't start moving until tomorrow, according to Masego," I replied. "But you might say that, yes. I don't suppose you have anything to tell me that'd make this loom a little shorter?"

"You want a report?" she asked, eyebrow rising.

"Nothing too detailed," I said. "We'll have a proper briefing with everyone at a sane hour. But give me the broad strokes."

She hummed.

"Well, before we touch Procer, I have something from down south," she said.

My gaze sharpened.

"The League?"

She nodded and I grimaced. I'd wanted a garrison in Dormer to keep that front under control, but Juniper had dug in her heels. The city was indefensible, she'd argued, without a fleet. And Callow had neither the gold, the sailors or the know-how to make one. She had a point about Dormer, especially after the fight with Summer had wrecked major parts of its defences that we'd only partly repaired. Coin, coin, coin. More relentless a foe than even Akua. The men had been sent to Vale instead, with only a handful of mages in Dormer to sound the alarm if it came to war. Which it was hard to say if it might. My attempt at diplomatic correspondence with the newly-elected Hierarch had

yielded only a neatly-penned letter chastising me for being a foreign despot, which while very politely phrased was less than promising. On the other hand, merchant shipping up the Hwaerte had actually increased over the last few months if Ratface was to be believed. Not the sign of hostilities about to erupt.

"I have reason to believe that the League has no interest in Callow," Thief said.

"And how good is that reason?" I asked.

"The Tyrant of Helike had one of the Jacks taken off the streets and brought to him so he could swear eternal friendship with you," Vivienne bluntly said.

I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose, warding off the headache I knew wouldn't come.

"The man," I said slowly, "is notoriously mad. And treacherous. And, not to repeat myself but it bears mentioning, *fucking insane*."

"Agreed," Thief mildly replied. "He is also, as of last month, very discretely sending people into Waning Woods."

My eyes flew open and I kept my mouth shut as I considered the implications of that. The Waning Woods could lead straight into southern Callow, true. But he didn't need to go through there to make war on us. He had the fleets to just sail up the Hwaerte uncontested without any of the risks strolling through that hellscape of a forest entailed. Which meant he was considering that route to sidestep something else, and there was only one force I knew about that qualified. The Proceran army in the southern principality of Tenerife, sent there specifically to discourage League aggression.

"You're sure?" I quietly pressed.

"There's a decent chance that he allowed my people to see him sending his own in there," Thief admitted. "It could be a plot to get us to lower our guards, but at this point does he really *need* us to lower our guard?"

No, I thought. Not with fifty thousand crusaders marching into Callow and an even larger host knocking at the front door in the Vales. There wasn't a lot I could immediately do to drive him back if he just decided to invade without all the fanfare.

"That would change things," I murmured. "If he pulls the trigger on that. . . "

"Looming shorter yet?" Vivienne teased.

"I'd kiss you, if you weren't so painfully indifferent to women," I replied with a smirk.

She coughed awkwardly. I had no intentions there whatsoever, but seeing her get jittery at the lightest of suggestions was always good for a laugh.

"Yes, well, Procer," she muttered. "We've already had some talks about what's waiting in Arans. As far as the Jacks can tell, there's two real ringleaders in that crowd. The Procer part, anyway."

"Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre," I said. "Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan. Milenan's supposed to be the one holding most everyone else's leash."

"Don't discount Malanza," she warned me. "Politically she'd dependent on Milenan – her younger brother's trying to sweet-talk Hasenbach into backing

him – but she's the one that'll be leading the armies. Her mother fucked up so catastrophically during the civil war that she's low on allies at the moment, but she's the best commander in that army and they all know it. She'll get a lot more influential in that circle when the swords come out."

"And what do we know about her?" I frowned.

"Not much," Thief reluctantly admitted. "She's stayed off of the stage since taking her coronation. But I have somewhat reliable word that she's one of the hardline expansionists in the Highest Assembly even if she's quiet about it."

"If she's out of favour with Hasenbach, that reinforces the case the First Prince isn't actually out to annex us," I said.

"Hasenbach broke her mother's bid for the throne and made her drink poison afterwards," Thief hedged. "It might just be personal. Regardless, if the First Prince is out for land we both know she can't admit that right know. It'd eat away at the crusade from the inside. Levant's not mustering armies for the Principate to grow larger, and if they get even a hint that's the plan. . . "

"I think she might genuinely be after only the Empire, Vivienne," I admitted. "And if that's really the case, she has a fucking point. Malicia fanned the civil war in her country for two decades. And there's that *other thing* too."

Stating out loud that the Empress had essentially given Diabolist free reign to do whatever she wanted so long as by the time the dust settled she had a weapon to frighten off the rest of Calernia would have been. . . dangerous. I'd already told the rest of the Woe this much, but not anyone else. Whether Hasenbach knew this was the case or she was just using Second Liesse to justify the Tenth Crusade, I could not know for sure. It wasn't like I could ask the woman when we spoke, either, not while I was uncertain of what she knew and did not.

"I'll applaud and toast her health, if she brings down the Tower," Thief said. "But that is *not* a woman I want deciding what happens to my shit, Catherine. Even if we assume the best about her, she's still got the Highest Assembly to answer to. And we've had long talks about the kind of people that have seats on that."

"I'm not talking surrender," I told Thief. "But you know how much there's riding on Hasenbach being at least halfway reasonable."

"That begs the question of how reasonable she'll be allowed to be," Vivienne replied flatly. "And that brings us back neatly to Amadis Milenan. I've confirmed he was in the know for the Liesse Rebellion."

"We already knew Hasenbach would need a mandate to send that much silver across the border," I said. "He's the most influential man in Procer, it's not really feasible for her to have kept him out of it."

"What we *didn't* know, at least until now, is that he argued strongly for a Proceran to be in command of the rebel forces," Thief said. "The man likes his wine, and he's not as careful about who might be listening as he should be. That said, there's a two thousand denarii hole in the funds you allocated me."

I stared at her incredulously.

"Two *thousand*?"

"Yeah, well, even servants in that fucker's palace are rich," Vivienne muttered. "You wouldn't believe how hard they were to bribe."

Aside from a mournful thought about where I'd have to take that coin from to compensate, I came to grasp what she was getting at pretty quick.

"You think he wanted to be personally in command," I said.

"Look, I know the Eyes think his ambition makes him usable to shake up Procer from the inside," the dark-haired woman said. "But that's Wasteland talk, Catherine. He's a fucking snake and now we have precedent."

Precedent for Prince Amadis Milenan to consider war in Callow as way to enable his bid for the throne of the Principate. Shit. That was a problem. I'd been banking on the commanders of the crusader host in the north being rational enough that after a series of minor field defeats they'd cut their losses and retreat back into Procer, if I gave them the space. But Milenan was in command, and if he saw this as his only good chance to dislodge Hasenbach? He might decide to gamble it all anyway, and that would force me to actually break his army. Which would fuck up all my long-term plans, to say the least.

"We'll untangle that particular mess in full at the briefing," I sighed. "What've you got on the heroes? None of this matters if they just splatter us across the countryside at the first scrap."

"Wasn't able to get all the Names," Thief said. "But I do have a number for you: there's fourteen of them."

I let out a long breath. That was... a lot more than I'd hoped for. Given the reputation the Calamities still commanded, I'd thought most Named would be headed there for the offensive. *Still fewer than they sent against Triumphant*, I mused. *So there's that.* Black had always told me that too many heroes in the same place might end up turning against them. That Creation would push some stories above others, and that those who ended up behind were much easier to kill. It made villains seem a lot stronger than they were when they killed a few, and incited sloppiness and overconfidence if they survived. The thing was, though, that those villains usually still *died*. That tended to happen when someone sent a battalion of Heavens-empowered hardened killers after someone's head. I'd refined the Woe, over the last year. Turned them into a group eerily skilled at killing the heroes that came into Callow and refused my terms. But in those fights, we'd had either superior numbers or parity. On picked grounds, with enough time for me to prepare. None of that would apply up north.

"Most of them are green, and from all over Calernia," Thief spoke into the silence. "Levant, the Free Cities, Ashur. Local Named, I guess you could call them. Not the kind you see at the head of an invasion."

"Any from Procer?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Which brings me to the two I think we most need to watch out for," Vivienne said. "The first is the Proceran, an Alamans. Laurence de Montfort, the

Saint of Swords."

"I think I've heard of her before," I frowned.

"She got started killing some alchemist villain in western Procer under a transitional Name," Thief said. "Nasty business. He was turning people into monsters. Then she killed the Prince of Valencis when she was in her twenties and no one's quite sure why. She disappeared into the woodworks after that. There's rumours she went up north, but mostly people say she was 'perfecting her craft' in a retreat from the earthly world."

"She hasn't done anything since?" I frowned.

"Dubious source, but I was told she stared down an army into marching around her hometown during the civil war," Vivienne said. "Whatever the truth, she's in her late sixties and she's Hells on legs. Supposedly unbeatable with a sword, and she's been known to cut through spells, wards and even once an actual miracle."

"Well, that promises to be a fun evening," I muttered.

That sounded a lot like Ranger, only with a Choir having her back, and wasn't that stuff nightmares were made of?

"The other big club is Levantine," Thief said. "The Grey Pilgrim, couldn't dig up a name. This one... Well, the more I learn the more he scares me shitless."

Thief wasn't the bravest of my companions, but she wasn't exactly faint of heart either. That she'd go this far was worth alarm.

"Priest Name?" I asked.

"Some kind of wandering monk, as far as I can tell," Vivienne said. "He's not, well, not like you. He's not the one everyone attaches to. He's the stranger in the night, and he's been around for a *while*."

"Heroes age," I reminded her.

"And I've word of him going back at least sixty years under his current Name," Thief bluntly replied. "Catherine, the man's been everywhere. Every Levantine hero in the last forty years ran into him at some point, and in the Dominion if he said he felt like being king half the country would rise to put him on the throne. As long as he backs the crusade, there's not a single hero from the Dominion that'll flinch."

"Influential and experienced, then," I said, but honestly as far as direct threats went the Saint sounded a lot worse.

It also meant he couldn't be killed if Levant was ever to be brought at the negotiating table. You couldn't kill a people's darling and then expect a nice peace treaty after, but I wasn't sure I'd be given a choice there. Thief passed a hand through her hair, frustrated.

"I'm not explaining myself right," she said. "Just – all right, think about it like this. Hero out on their first lark, meets a mysterious helpful stranger that gives advice and maybe teaches a trick. When's the next time you see them?"

My fingers clenched.

"When that hero's in over their head," I said softly. "When the stranger appears out of nowhere and wipes the floor with the villain, enough that the hero can flee and prepare for the rematch."

"Yeah," Vivienne agreed grimly. "That's the thing, Cat. He doesn't always win, but I couldn't find a single instance of when the Grey Pilgrim got into a fight and *lost*."

Well. It was a good thing I didn't need to sleep anymore, because that was the kind of thing that would keep a girl up at night.

Chapter 5

Interests

> "Ruling is not unlike gardening, if all the weeds were heavily armed and plotting your demise."
>
> Dread Empress Prudence the First, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

After Thief was gone, I lingered in my solar and waited for the scrying I knew would come. Over the silent hours that followed, I found only my thoughts for company and the downwards spiral they so often took of late.

The thing with bad habits was that you rarely realized you had them until they came back to bite you in the ass. I'd had months since Second Liesse to try to map out where and why I'd failed, and as far as I could tell a lot of failures ran from the same source: I tended to react more than prevent. I could even see where that fracture line had been born, the moment I'd effectively been first among equals in Callow yet still went at everything thinking like the Squire. Looking back at that entire year, the picture wasn't pretty. I'd recognized Diabolist as a threat, but taken only half-measures against her and *badly* underestimated the kind of damage she could cause if left alive. The moment I'd realized she was preparing a ritual, I should have taken the Fifteenth down south in full strength and crushed her without mercy. I hadn't seen the fae coming at all, but neither had anyone else so on that particular mark I'd withhold the blame. When it had become clear I was dealing with an Arcadian invasion, though, I'd botched the affair again. I'd pulled it off, in the end, but only with Malicia's help and after leaving the south in the hands of Summer for months.

I'd gone after armies, the visible threats, but I hadn't aimed at the roots of the debacle tree until much too late in the campaign. There was an old saying in Callow about failure being the most apt of teachers. Considering how monumental my failures had been, I should have learned quite a bit.

Some conclusions had been evident. The coup by the Praesi elements of the Ruling Council still felt like a footnote in a much larger affair, but it'd brought one truth to the light of day: if I ruled, if I put on a crown, I gained ties I couldn't

neglect. The situation in Laure had only come to a head because I wasn't there to scare them into line, but that was the problem wasn't it? That I had to *scare* them into line. The Empire worked like that, but the Empire tore itself to pieces with depressing regularity and had antagonized the rest of Calernia badly enough that they'd had four crusades sent their way. Worse, the climbing of the Tower encouraged a sort of pervasive ugly thinking that bloodletting was healthy. A way of thought that Black and Malicia were wrestling with to this day. The thing was, the whole *iron sharpens iron* philosophy did not actually deliver on what it promised: that the most competent, dangerous and ambitious person would end up claiming the Tower. Praesi history made that much blatantly clear. A lot of the Dread Emperors and Empresses who were now remembered as little more than punchlines had actually been very good at a single thing: killing their rivals frequently and brutally enough that no one overthrew them. For a while, anyway.

It was a skill set, I had to concede that much. But it wasn't one that necessarily translated to competent rule, even before you factored in the kind of infernal pacts those same Tyrants often made to come out on top and their later consequences. No, the more I read the more I was coming to the conclusion that there were two reasons Praes hadn't collapsed onto itself: the High Lords and the other villains. The same families who'd formed the Truebloods under Malicia and caused so much trouble were the same that regularly overthrew Emperors, but they were also families who poured a lot of wealth and influence into keeping Praes together. None of them wanted to rule only *part* of the Empire, the next time one of their kinsmen claimed the crown. That their way to keep it all together usually involved copious amounts of killing, an assault on Callow or general tightening of the screws on greenskins was horrid from where I stood, but in their closed little circle made perfect sense. It wasn't like anyone in Praes who wasn't highborn *mattered*, in their eyes. And then there were the villains. Chancellor, Black Knight, Warlock. Those were the most frequent, but every century seemed to bring its own batch of ancillary Named like Captain, Assassin and Scribe. None of them had been, if the histories were to be believed, particularly pleasant people. But as long as black-tempered demigods – for the old breed of villains had been that, for all their many flaws – were watching the Empire, anyone trying to splinter Praes was running the risk of taking their attention from their own petty feuds and turning it to the nail currently standing out. That tended to end poorly for the nail in question.

Callow had none of these structures. The House of Fairfax and the the aristocrats had been the backbone of the kingdom's rule before the Conquest, and they were now either thoroughly exterminated or gutted by a series of brutal wars and the purges that followed. At the moment the Kingdom of Callow had one thing keeping it together: me. And that was a *really bad idea*, as the Laure coup had made clear. Because if it was all on my shoulders, the moment I went out on campaign or was taken out of the field by a Named scrap for a while,

it all began to crumble. I'd spent long nights with Hakram putting together a way to rule this country that would weather my absence without outright turning every office over to the Regals or the Queen's Men. We'd done better than I could reasonably expect. Folding the old Praesi-built bureaucracy into the royal court had centralized power, yes, but more around Laure than myself. Most of it could function without me there to oversee it. And Ratface, Gods bless his cantankerous soul, had worked miracles where he could.

The Royal Mint in Marchford had put enough coin out there that the Tower no longer essentially decided the amount of currency we had to spare. Ratface was alarmed about he fact that the Empress still sat over massive reserves of precious metals accrued over two decades of peace and looting Callow, and that if she ever cut them loose the overflow of gold and silver would break the south and damage the rest of the kingdom. I couldn't dismiss that worry out of hand, but Malicia *was* at war. I knew better than most the Empress wasn't above putting an arrow in her foot if she thought it would lead to a long-term gain, but as long as she needed Callow functional enough to get in the crusade's way I couldn't see her pulling the trigger. It was still an awkward position: I could not and would not remain under the Tower's thumb, but if I ever got *too* out of line Malicia would have to react and coin was one of the better ways she had of hurting me. And there were risks, of course, to an unstable and war-torn country starting to mint its own coin. It'd been patriotic sentiment more than trust that saw people embracing the new currency, and sentiment was a dangerous thing to use as foundation.

I was popular enough in Callow that at the moment there was no real chance of uprising, but I would have to be very careful to keep it that way. Thief had made it clear that up north I was considered to have picked up the worst of the Fairfaxes overreaches and the most grating Praesi methods, then made both them my reign's central tenets. I had strong grip in central Callow, where a lot of people still saw me as the woman who'd given the boot to the most hated aspects of Praesi rule and taken the field repeatedly to keep the kingdom safe. In the south, though, it was a mixed bag. Hakram had overseen the feeding and settling of the refugees and that'd raised my reputation by extension, but Laure still loomed tall in everyone's memories. It didn't help that southerners tended to be more religious, as a rule, and that for all that my coronation had been at a Sister's hands I was still very much a villain. Down there, I was backed only so long as every other alternative was measurably worse. At least Procer's known involvement in the Liesse Rebellion had them almost as hated as Praes: the backlash in sentiment had only grown starker when rumours trickled in that the Tenth Crusade would be going through Callow. Conspiracies were being peddled that the First Prince had arranged it all to weaken the country enough it wouldn't be able to fight back, and the way they were not waning but growing in popularity had the Empress' signature all over it.

Her Dread Majesty had been quiet, of late, but it would be a blunder to

believe that meant she wasn't setting up the board for her later moves.

I'd begun to work on Callow too late, I knew. Less than a year of seeing to the country, when I had to both double the size of the army and rebuild a third of the realm? That Ratface had managed to find the coin for any of this was a testament to how ridiculously resourceful my former Supply Tribune was. I'd had to resign myself, in the end, to the truth that this was as much good as I could do before the swords came out. And there never really had been a doubt that the swords *would* come out, which was why I'd poured so much coin into the Jacks even when Juniper was howling in outrage. If I started to fight this war only when the armies began marching, I'd lose. It was as simple as that. Black had once told me that if I didn't start acting instead of reacting I would rack up greater and greater disasters, and I cursed myself still for not having listened to him then. I would not make that mistake again, and that meant going in with both a plan and a notion of what my opponents were up to. I had my plan. It'd taken me months and more people brought in to put it together than I was truly comfortable with, but I had the the skeleton of the Liesse Accords on parchment. Now I just had to make sure everyone else in this mess was ready to sign them, and that was a different beast.

Malicia, I knew, never would agree. That meant Malicia had to go, sooner or later, and that put a particular tone to the fact that her spymistress was contacting me on the eve of my departure for the northern campaign.

The scrying basin lit up and I leaned over, watching my interlocutor closely. Ime looked older than when I'd last seen her. The lines on her face were deeper, and though her hair remained dark I suspected there was dye behind the absence of white locks. She was warier speaking to me than she'd once been, as she should be. Aisha's kinsmen had dug up a few things about her when I asked. She'd been one of the Heir's closest supporters, when Black had still been the Squire, and the only one to survive my teacher's unsurprisingly thorough retribution as he rose to prominence. She'd been inserted at court under Dread Emperor Nefarious as a hidden ally for the then-concubine Malicia, and later served as the Empress' most precious informant in Ater during the civil war. Anyone who could deceive a Chancellor and a panoply of Praesi highborn could not be taken lightly, so I was about as wary as she herself was looking.

"Your Majesty," the spymistress greeted me.

Her face was small, on the stone basin I used for official scrying with the Tower, but remarkably detailed. Masego had done good work with the instrument.

"Lady Ime," I replied, inclining my head.

"I bear word from Her Most Dreadful Majesty," she said. "It has come to the Tower's attention that you will be leaving for campaign with dawn."

"As agreed, the defence of Callow is part of my responsibilities as tributary state of Praes," I said. "Though reinforcing Black at the Vales is no longer feasible, I will be meeting Prince Milenan's army in battle."

"The prompt discharging of your obligation does you honour," Ime said, though we both knew that to be empty words. I wasn't doing any of this for the Empress' sake. "The Tower has, however, instructions in the specifics of that discharge."

Ah, and there we went. *I know what you're after this time, you old spider.* I was about to be told, I suspected, that Amadis Milenan was to survive his little jaunt through the Whitecaps.

"It will be my pleasure, of course, to listen to such instructions," I mildly replied.

I'd learned to choose my words more carefully, and not just because I had a fancy hat. Ime understood perfectly well the backdoor I'd allowed myself in this, but I'd not given her grounds enough to harden her language. We were still at the part of the game were my deep love and loyalty for the Empress was fantasy we both pretended to be fact.

"It has been decreed in the Tower's interests that certain royals within the crusader host be spared the sword," Ime said.

"Fascinating," I smiled, wide and mirthless. "Shall I guess the names?"

"In deference to the current state of war, that will not be necessary," the spymistress blandly replied. "There are only two: Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre and Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan."

The schemer and the general. Essentially the only two people that mattered in that army, aside from the heroes. I allowed the empty smile to lapse.

"And this... decree," I said. "Does it bear the Tower's seal? Or is it simply an instruction from Her Dread Majesty?"

How far are you willing to push this? Are you going to make it treason to disobey? That, at the moment, was the most important bit to find out. The line the Empress took on this would tell me quite a bit. Like, for example, if ignoring her would be followed by immediate reprisal. The last news from Aisha's relatives had the Ashuran war fleet in the Tideless Isles, an obvious prelude to attacking Praesi shores, so I doubted any of the Legions would be marching west. I had a garrison in place at Summerholm to stop them cold if they did, anyway. But the kind of pressure she was willing to bring down would give me a glimpse of her timetable: when was she going to stop thinking of me as a disposable asset and instead consider me a threat to deal with? She only had two armies in place to ward off Procer, and Black wasn't going anywhere now that Prince Papenheim was on the move. *So tell me, Malicia, when is your play inside Procer going to make me irrelevant to the defence of your borders?*

"A mere instruction," Ime smiled charmingly. "Her Dread Majesty recognizes the realities of battle may prevent you from carrying out her intent."

At least until the passage is secure, then, I thought. *Now show me the knife, Tyrant.*

"Of course, failing to achieve this may cast doubts about your ability amongst certain circles," Ime continued. "As we are currently mustering for the defence

of the coast, I regret to inform you that Her Dread Majesty lacks the men to enforce the safety of trade routes with Callow."

So, the moneybag. Not unexpected. She wouldn't do anything too overt, no. Wouldn't even let her people be involved. She just needed to whisper in the ears of the right High Lords and the wolves would start going after my granaries and my traders while my army was on the wrong side of Callow to stop them. How typically Praesi that even when I was marching against an army that wanted her head on a pike she'd still threaten to shove sticks in my wheels. My fingers clenched. As always, the Empress toed the line skilfully. Escalation, but not enough it would cripple me or force heavy-handed retaliation on my part. I'd had a tutor in Praesi politics lately, though. One I despised, but Akua Sahelian knew the ways of the Wasteland the way only a monster born to its highest reaches could. Time to put what I'd learned to work. I'd spent months scrabbling for every way I knew to check Winter's influence on my thoughts, well aware of how much of a liability it made me when I swam in the deeper waters, and one of the side-effects of that had been learning exactly how that influence rose when I reached for the mantle. *Fear*, I instructed myself. *Fear but nothing else*. I smiled, and let Winter coil through my veins.

Frost tinged the sides of the stone basin as Ime's face went blank.

"Sabra Niri," I said, tone caressing the words, and she shivered. "I was surprised, to learn of your kinship to the High Lord of Okoro."

Her name had been learned, not given, and this made difference. It was still a foothold. Fear spread in her mind like a drop of ink in water. Thinned, yes, but contaminating every part of her. I could taste it, even through this thin link of sympathetic sorcery. I savoured it. I watched the curve of her neck, and considered snapping it. A little reminder to Malicia that threats were not inconsequential. Perhaps too brutal, I mused. Taking simply her sight would be sufficient. I could whisper through this working and shatter those pretty little orbs with a single word. Make bauble of them, perhaps. A bracelet for her to wear as a reminder of the costs of slighting me. *Fear. Fear but nothing else*. A weak, indecisive design. I balked at it. We would see.

"Have you ever heard the Wild Hunt ride, Sabra Niri?" I asked quietly.

It was a pretty mask of calm she wore, but it was a very thin and feeble one. It would be delightful to rip it off.

"I am not certain what you imply, Queen Catherine," Ime said.

"It comes slowly, triptych unfolding," I told her. "First you hear the horns. Distant, like-"

My voice was halfway other, the crack of glaciers and the stillness of fallen snow.

"- a promise, almost a whisper," I said. "Then you hear the hooves, and that is when you know yourself hunted."

She began to speak, but I clicked my tongue. Her lips closed and she swallowed loudly.

"The last thing you hear, Sabra Niri, is the laughter," I murmured. "It is sport to them, you see. Like a deer that can scream and oh, how they *enjoy* the screams."

"The Hunt is under your command," Ime said. "To send them after citizens of the Empire would be rebellion."

"Citizens?" I mused. "No. *Animals*. Animals are what they would pursue."

I turned my gaze on her.

"Wherever they might be," I softly spoke. "Whoever might shield them. They would... disappear. As if by the hand of a god."

I smiled and showed my teeth, knew them sharper than a human's should be. Hunger made fangs wherever it spread.

"Shall we speak of gods, Sabra Niri?" I asked.

"The Wasteland is not without learning in this matter," she replied.

"Then perhaps it should it should pay heed to these old lessons," I said. "I wish you sweet dreams, Sabra Niri. And a kindness, for the one you once offered – running never helps, but it is still better than being *caught*."

I cut the strings of the the spell, before I could talk myself into claiming her tongue for the arrogance of *having threatened me*. The sheer gall of that insect – I breathed in and out, slowly. Fear. Fear and nothing else. I'd stayed within the bounds. I spent half an hour alone and unmoving in the solar afterwards, letting the influence of Winter ebb. It was worse than the chats with Hasenbach, because this time I'd leaned in willingly. That made a difference. When I embraced it of my own free will it was always slower to recede. Gods, I wanted a drink. But the way my hand refused to move told me the oath considered me on campaign already. It'd been playing with munitions, letting Winter out, but that was the entire point. So long as Malicia believed me unstable, willing to escalate starkly at the first offence, she would be wary of starting her usual games. *Except it's not pretending if I really am that volatile, is it?* I clenched my fingers. I couldn't stay queen, not in the long term. Not when I had that lurking thing in the back of my soul and no real solution to leash it. But the only person I could feasibly abdicate to was Anne Kendall, and Thief was sure she didn't currently have the backing to stay on the throne if I put her there. Which I couldn't do, anyway, not without starting a war with the Tower and likely Black as well. For now, I had to stay. Under all the checks I could manage without crippling the kingdom's rebuilding. Fuck, I missed Hakram. It was always easier when he was around, and once more I regretted sending anyone else to Vale would have slowed necessary work by months.

Dawn found me looking through glass panels, an open manuscript on my knees. We'd be moving out soon, to fight a war against unbeatable men in a battle where I had to refrain from spilling my enemy's blood. *Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.*

Well, the Heavens were certainly attempting to deliver.

Chapter 6

Hedges

> "Irritant's Law: inevitable doom is a finite resource, and becomes mere doom when split between multiple heroic bands. Nemeses should never simultaneously engage a single villain."
>
> Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

I sat at a table across from Baron Henry Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Ainsley Morley of Harrow, shared a smile with them and wondered which one of them would be the first to try to sell me out to the crusaders.

I knew for a fact that Procer had approached the both of them long before a hole was punched through the Whitecaps. Hasenbach's people were good, but the Observatory was better and no one had any real idea yet of exactly what it could do. You couldn't counter something you didn't know about, as I had learned the hard way. I'd been keeping a close eye on these two, through both the Jacks and sorcerous means, and even though Morley was the one who'd just had to flee her own city my bet was on Darlington being the one to try for a deal. He was the older of the two, in his late forties, and though he'd had a reputation as a knight of some skill in his youth his belly made it clear he'd traded swords for mutton chops a long time ago. Morley, the Jacks had informed me, was in her thirties but had inherited the barony from her father only a year before the Liesse Rebellion. Her lands were larger than Darlington's but her personal holdings smaller and the rest split among vassals who'd been rather unruly after her ascension. If the betrayal came from the Harrow contingent, I'd wager that it would be from one of her sworn lords and not Morley herself. Both of them were being very cordial as we shared a drink – water for me, that tricky little oath – but they were also quite bad at hiding how surprised they were I'd reached Hedges so quickly.

Seven days through Arcadia, and my twenty thousand strong Army of Callow began marching out into the pastures to the south of the city. The Observatory had confirmed that the crusaders were only starting to come out on the Callowan side of the passage through the Whitecaps. Slower than expected,

but then our estimates had been based on Legion marching speeds. Revised downwards, of course, but apparently not quite enough. There'd been some alarm when we popped out of the woodworks, but I'd been one of the first out the fairy gate and to be blunt if we'd meant to take Hedges there wasn't shit either of them could have done about it. The city was more of a glorified town, and its defences were laughable. The curtain wall was a short and worn-down compared to almost every other city in Callow, since the north had never really faced the threat of Praesi invasions. Their enemies had been each other, which involved more cattle-theft than sieges even in the old days before unification, and on rare occasion Daoine. The Deoraithe were not prone to expansion, but before they were brought into the fold by Eleanor Fairfax they'd not been above the occasional raid or punitive expedition to express displeasure at the royal family in Laure.

"I'm impressed by how quickly you got your people out, Baroness," I told Morley. "And how thoroughly."

There was a slight tinge of discomfort in their eyes at the reminder that I knew exactly what was going on in their lands and they had no real idea how. Darlington cleared his throat.

"Perhaps prematurely, Your Majesty, if you'll forgive my saying so. It seems to me it might have been possible to contest Harrow."

I took that more as an indication that he'd rather pitched battles not take place at even the outskirts of his lands than sympathy for Morley, but then he'd gotten on my nerves often enough I wasn't inclined to think well of him. I sipped at my cup.

"They've moved slower than anticipated," I conceded. "There are, however, concerns you might not be considering. Do you both know what a Hell Egg is?"

Morley paled but Darlington was unmoved.

"Some Praesi devilry, no doubt," he said.

"It's true then," Baroness Ainsley said quietly. "The Lost Standard, it actually exists?"

"I have it on good authority it's in the lands around Harrow," I told her. "But my attempts to locate it have been fruitless for now."

Darlington was lost, and by the look on his face that was not a state of affairs he was willing to tolerate for long.

"And what Wasteland tale is this?" he said. "I did not take you for a superstitious sort, Your Majesty."

"Considering the Diabolist used one of those very standards against me at Marchford, superstition is perhaps the wrong term," I very mildly said.

It was rather delightful to watch it sink in. It was a well-told tale what I'd faced in the defence of what was now my personal holding.

"There's a *demon* in the north?" he hissed.

"My father told me that Triumphant left old madness behind her, when I was a child," Morley said. "I thought it a legend, but are these not times where old stories breathe again?"

"I won't fight heroes on grounds where releasing a demon is a risk," I told them frankly. "The moment the crusaders forged a beachhead near Harrow, it became indefensible. I'm sorry for what that puts your people through, Baroness, but-"

The woman shook her head.

"No, Your Majesty," she said. "Nothing was lost but pride and coin. If anything, I must thank you sincerely for your prudence. I would rather see my coffers emptied than my people. . . "

She trailed off, and I didn't finish that sentence for her. Where demons were concerned, the least said was always the better.

"They're my people too," I said quietly. "I would rather not fight this war at all, but diplomatic resolution has been refused."

"*Procer*," Morley said feelingly.

And though I suspected Darlington wished me dead at least once a day, even his lip curled in distaste at the mention of the Principate. We did like our grudges, us Callowans, and Procer had earned more than a few. That passing moment of common feeling did nothing to blind me to the very real possibility that one or both of these two would try to sell me down the river before the month was out.

"I would offer my men for the battle, Your Majesty," Morley finally said.

"It'd be a pleasure to fold your horse under the Broken Bells," I told her. "I'll send Grandmaster Talbot your way. But if you mean to send foot as well, I'll need Legion officers overseeing. Marshal Juniper will not agree otherwise."

The latter was a little sketchy, under current Callowan law, but Juniper was the highest officer in the Army of Callow and theoretically had the same broad authority that the Shining Princes and ruling Fairfaxes had once held in war time. This particular request, though, had consistently seen me stonewalled by the same two nobles in front of me. Even after amending the request to having *observing* Legion officers it had remained a sticking point. Baroness Kendall had argued the matter wasn't worth forcing, given the limited amount of men these two could bring, and she'd had a point. Better not to have them at all than have them only as unreliable addition.

"That will not be an issue," Baroness Ainsley grimly said.

Some of my surprise must have shown on my face, because she offered a rueful smile.

"Morleys have held Harrow for three hundred years, Your Majesty," she said. "I will not surrender my lands to some prancing Proceran shit without a fight."

"We'll be glad to have you," I said.

That'd been. . . unexpected. And, though I'd like to think better of her, was enough of a change it raised my suspicions. Still, it wouldn't do to look a gift horse in the mouth too openly.

"They sent an envoy," Morley suddenly said.

My eyes sharpened as I studied her. She looked embarrassed but determined.

"The Procerans, they sent an envoy," she said. "To offer terms."

Baron Darlington had gone very, very still. I drank a mouthful of water then calmly set down the cup.

"Good ones, I hope?"

She snorted.

"I would be allowed to keep my lands," she said. "A marriage to one of our *betters* would be arranged for one of my children as well. They wanted Henrietta, which was rather telling. They're more interested in us taking their names than the other way around."

"Let me guess," I drawled. "You were to join with the army and pass information. Maybe change sides halfway through a battle?"

"They were slightly more circumspect," the baroness said. "But the implications ran along those lines. They... it was a way to weather the storm, Your Majesty."

I watched her closely. She'd not agreed, no. She wouldn't have spoken up otherwise. But she'd not chased them out either. I'd already known that, but I was surprised she was willing to share. *You dislike me*, I thought. *We both know that. But in the end for all that you see me an evil I am Callowan evil and that still matters, doesn't it?*

"Treason," Darlington said thickly. "How horrid. It is mother's milk to the men of Procer, we have always known this."

"I do not hang women for entertaining envoys," I softly said. "And would rather have honest, open opposition than a snake in the grass. Hasenbach will make offers again. She needs to, because she knows it is madness to try to hold Callow by force while warring with the Wasteland. But make no mistake, she *needs* to hold Callow. And we all know Procer does not easily relinquish lands it takes."

Morley nodded slowly. She was not a handsome woman, and the stark relief on her face did her no favours.

"My duties prevent me from lingering," I told them, and slowly rose to my feet. "Baron Darlington, an officer from the general staff will seek audience to discuss our supply lines."

"They will find me a welcoming host, Your Majesty," the man said, rising to his feet as well.

I nodded at Morley, then paused. I looked into Darlington's eyes.

"A redheaded man," I stated, "with a Liessen accent. He stayed two days."

The man's face went bloodless.

"Always assume I know," I gently said.

I left only utter silence in my wake.

—

I'd decided, when first stumbling upon this particular wall, that it was too low to be meant as a defence. And too far from the city besides, though the low

hill overlooking the outskirts of Hedges would have been good grounds to raise a guard tower. Most likely it'd been used to keep cattle penned in, though by the looks of it years had passed since it'd last fulfilled that purpose. With the cool evening breeze and the view, it made a pleasant enough place to sit as I awaited the people I'd sent for. This was my first visit this far up north, and to be honest the entire region seemed rather bare to me. Green and brown fields made muddy by the melting snows spread as far as the eye could see, touched by only sparse thickets of trees and the occasional low slope. Hedges itself was a far cry from the large cities of the south. Larger than Dormer in overall size, perhaps, but most that space was empty and the city itself was visibly poorer. No paved streets, here, only mud tracks. And fewer stone houses than any other Callowan city I'd seen, most of them wooden structures with straw rooftops. Aside from the run-down curtain wall that sloppily circled outer Hedges, there were no real fortifications to speak of. Even the baron's keep was only a glorified hill with towers and a hall.

I puffed at my pipe and blew the smoke into the wind, watching twilight catch up to the Army of Callow encamped behind me. Cooking fires were already lit and the tents raised, a series of palisades preparing the soldiers for an attack unlikely to come this early. Juniper had insisted on full fortifications, though privately she'd told me it was more to drill the men in the raising of them than out of true worry got an enemy strike. A plume of wakeleaf streamed further and further away until it thinned out of existence, and I felt a smile quirk my lips. I'd have to give him this, even if my senses had only grown sharper he was still giving it a worthy effort.

"The mud gives you away," I said. "Should have tried it without boots."

"I have very delicate feet, Your Majestic Queenship," Special Tribune Robber cheerfully lied, rising from his crouched position beneath the hill's angled slope.

I hid the spasm of grief that passed through me when I looked at him. Robber was fifteen, now. Most goblins didn't make it past thirty-five, and past thirty they began to swiftly go decrepit. I'd always known at as a villain, if I didn't get killed, I'd likely outlive most my closest friends in the Fifteenth. Looking at the thickening eyebrow ridges and the fresh wrinkles around his mouth, I was imposed a fresh reminder that the goblins among my companions would be the first to go. Pickler wasn't showing either of those marks, but then she was from a matron line. Those were supposed to be almost a breed apart. I waited until he was plopped at my side, swinging his legs like a greenish murderous child, to reply.

"You know, lying to your monarch is technically treason," I informed him.

"I heard if you commit it enough time it cancels out," Robber mused. "I should probably keep doing it, just to be on the safe side."

"That's the kind of talk that'll get busted back to Lesser Lesser Footrest," I said, eyebrow quirking.

"Oh come on," he whined. "Where am I going to find another sworn enemy's father to murder?"

"Well, if anyone can it's going to be you," I snorted.

I inhaled the smoke as he remained silent, though never still. It was something I'd learned to notice about goblins: they always seemed to be moving, even if only slightly. Like they were afraid they'd drop dead if they stopped.

"We're about to start having informational issues," I finally told him. "Too many priests and heroes with the Procerans, and that'll screw with scrying. Even the Observatory's."

He grinned, wide and vicious.

"Are we still pretending that thing's just a pretty bunch of scrying pools?" he asked. "'cause the Catherine Foundling I know doesn't shell out that much gold for anything she can't swing at an enemy."

I smiled thinly but did not reply. The little discovery Masego had made that he called *absolute positioning* was potentially one of the nastiest tricks up my sleeve, but it was one I intended to sit on as long as possible. The moment I used it I would grow sharply as a threat in everyone's eyes. I couldn't afford that, not until I had all my pieces in place.

"We can narrow down their positions with the negatives," I said. "But we can't go in with sparse eyes against an army that large. How are the mages we assigned you?"

"They're coming along nicely," Robber said. "They don't even scream anymore when they wake up with a knife to the throat in the middle of the night."

"Don't break my mages, Robber," I sighed. "You know we don't have any to spare."

"You do me grave injustice," he mourned. "I'm teaching them important life lessons, like 'crying never helps' and 'sleeping deep is sleeping dead'."

"You're not getting new ones if you screw these ones up," I warned him. "There's nothing left from the Hedge Guild to draft."

"It's my Gods-given duty to educate tender-hearted Callowans like them," he righteously told me. "Speaking of, I heard this thing about northerners. Is it true they-"

"Every single joke about northerners and sheep has also been made about goblins and goats," I warned him.

"Calumny," he protested. "That hardly ever happens unless the goat is shaved and painted green."

I rolled my eyes.

"All right, if you're comfortable enough fucking around then they won't be an issue," I said. "Juniper will put scouts on the field, but I want a set of eyes deep behind enemy lines. You've just volunteered for that duty."

"I am the most dutiful goblin ever born," Robber agreed, clearly pleased. "Tell me we're not just skulking, though. It's been a while since my people stabbed anything, they're getting restless."

"I'm keeping you as a dagger," I said. "That means low profile until I use you."

He blew his tongue at me, which was mildly unsettling considering it was pitch black.

"Boo," he said. "Boo Catherine boo."

"Have Captain Borer write you up for insolence," I ordered. "The exceedingly well-document fact that you are a filthy wretch aside, we both know sending you to roam when there's a crew of heroes on the loose is like feeding a wolf meat scraps."

"They can't kill us if they don't fight us," he shrugged.

"I thought you'd say that," I grunted. "But I have worries, and Juniper shares them. So we're assigning you a partner."

"Tell me it's Larat," he begged. "The man is like a goblin that was fed particularly violent rocks."

Wait, could goblins actually eat – no, Catherine, never go down the Robber rabbit hole. There are no answers at the bottom, only headaches and befuddlement.

"No," I replied. "She's actually coming up right now."

Yellow eyes flicked downhill and then I was given the opportunity to delight in the vicious little bastard actually looking uneasy.

"*Gods* no," he said. "That's sadistic even for you, Queenie."

"Evening Cat," Archer grinned. "And you too, Robert."

"You know that's not my name," the goblin hissed.

"I'm very sorry, Bobber," Indrani said. "I swear."

"You can't send her with us," Robber said. "She bit off Akua's head!"

I blinked.

"She did what now?" I warily asked.

Robber looked shifty, which considering he could skulk in broad daylight without trying was an almost miraculous achievement.

"I'm not saying it happened, but it's possible a betting ring technically illegal under Legions regs just spontaneously emerged," he said.

"Akua was a scorpion," Archer cheerfully informed me.

"Not just a scorpion, you brute, she was a purebred Wasteland Rattler," the goblin insisted. "And her full name was Akua Sahedon't."

"You bit off a scorpion's head," I enunciated slowly, looking at Indrani.

She shrugged.

"The Lady always said it's important to establish the pecking order early in a relationship," she replied. "Wouldn't you agree, Borer?"

"That's someone else," Robber muttered peevishly. "And I had a month's pay riding on Akua killing Willie Angels."

So my sappers were importing no doubt massively oversized Wasteland scorpions, naming them after old opponents of mine and pitting them in death fights. I truly wished I could say that was the worst thing I'd ever caught them doing, but this was a bad time to start lying to myself.

"I'm going to pretend I never heard this," I decided out loud. "Mostly because, well, Hakram's not around and *I'm* sure as Hells not filing a report about giant scorpions if I can avoid it. As your beloved queen, I order you to pretend to get along when I'm within hearing range. There, I fixed it."

"I love it when she gets all authoritative," Archer told the goblin.

"I hope you also enjoy scorpions in your bedding," he whispered back at her. "Akua had babies, before you callously murdered her."

"See, he's already offering me snacks," Indrani smiled. "Herbert and I are great friends, Catherine. Just the best."

I closed my eyes and wished very hard they would disappear, but when I opened them they were obstinately still there. One of these days, that was going to work and they were all going to be sorry.

"Robber, get your people ready," I ordered. "You're leaving in half a bell. Archer. . . "

"No need, I've already prepared supplies," Indrani replied, hoisting up what was quite clearly a wineskin full of – by the smell of it – hard liquor.

"Just don't forget your bow," I sighed.

Gods go with them, though hopefully not the ones Above. The kind if work I had in mind for these two would be frowned upon, upstairs.

Chapter 7

Snares

> "Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns."
>
> Proceran saying

"We're being baited," Juniper announced.

We'd cut loose the general staff for this particular meeting, at my insistence. The Arcadian Campaign had taught me that while the broader officer councils had their uses they also devoured time and focus that would be better spent on other matters. The Hellhound was my Marshal of Callow now, she had the clout to run those however she liked without my being at the table to back her up. There were advantages to formal rank and not leading an awkward coalition I had only nominal authority over. Only the bare bones of a council were in attendance, the people that would have direct relevance, and that meant three aside from me: Juniper herself, Thief and Grandmaster Talbot. I preferred to cut that latter out of these little evenings when it came to politics, but on campaign was a different beast. I could not have the head of my horse ignorant of the larger realities at work.

"That's the theory, anyway," Thief hedged. "There's a few unprovable assumptions at work."

"May I assume we are speaking of the Proceran vanguard?" Brandon Talbot asked.

"We are," I confirmed. "The report you haven't gotten to read yet states that, as of midmorning, five thousand Proceran horse has invested Harrow."

The Grandmaster's eyes narrowed. We'd given ground to the crusaders knowing they would take or pass through the city on their way south, but Talbot was a clever sort. He'd noticed, as the rest of us had, what the reports *didn't* mention. Which was anything but a detachment of horse sent far ahead of the still-lumbering Proceran army.

"The Jacks could not get into the city itself, mind you," Vivienne said. "But I had knots of people out in the country and they say the riders came alone. The crusader army is at least two days behind."

Talbot smiled ruefully.

"Five thousand light horse," he said. "We have number parity with the Order, and the strength of the Woe and the Hunt besides. Should we play it carefully, we could wipe out a significant part of their cavalry before it comes to a pitched battle."

"We're being baited," Juniper repeated.

"Too good to be true, isn't?" I agreed darkly. "I think we need to reassess how much of a threat Princess Malanza actually is. I didn't expect that kind of sophistication from a Proceran commander, given the nature of the trap."

The Principate was famous for rarely fielding Named, unlike Praes and Callow who usually had at least a handful on each side when the blades came out. And while it was an assumption, like Thief had reminded us, I was willing to put hand to flame that if we gated into Harrow we'd be walking straight into a carefully arranged heroic kill zone.

"Assuming this is her notion," Talbot frowned.

"It's not Milenan," I said. "We know exactly what *he's* up to, as it happens."

The Grandmaster raised an inquisitive eyebrow, though he knew better than to request information he might not be cleared to know. I cast a look at Vivienne and nodded.

"Prince Amadis Milenan had a previously unknown agent within Hedges," she said. "We know that now, because this morning the woman attempted to discretely get in touch with Baron Darlington."

Talbot grit his teeth.

"He always did fancy himself ruler of the north," the aristocrat unkindly said.

"We allowed it to happen," Thief said. "While watching, of course, but we wanted to know exactly what he was after."

"Land," I bluntly said. "Land is what he's after, as it turns out. Prince Milenan is already gathering support for the divvying up of Callow, and he seems to believe Darlington is the key to the north."

"The man's making a lot of promises, for someone without a field victory to his name," Juniper growled.

Brandon Talbot, for all that his meddling got on my nerves, was not slow-witted. He understood what we were driving at without need for an explicit statement.

"Darlington's been promised the north as his own principality under the First Prince," he deduced, visibly appalled.

"Mostly right," Vivienne said. "There's a prior change of throne involved in that promise coming true. Amadis is a little more openly ambitious than we'd previously assumed."

And he was gathering allies for his bid. I'd let Talbot into the loop for the Darlington play, but for now there was no need to tell him that Prince Milenan was also sending men towards the Silver Lake as quickly as they could ride. The Observatory had picked them out two days ago, and I agreed with Thief's

assessment of their ultimate destination: Daoine. The crusaders were trying to get Duchess Kegan on their side before moving south. I could see why he'd assume there was room to negotiate there: the last time Callow had come under Proceran occupation, the Duchy of Daoine had remained out of the fray in exchange for concessions and effective independence. They'd even fielded armies alongside Procer's, when the Empire began the Sixty Years War by trying to invade occupied Callow. Both Praes and the Old Kingdom had come out of that ruinous war on the brink of collapse, but Daoine had gotten off light. It always did. House Ismail had a well-earned reputation for knowing when to strike its banners and cut its losses. Unfortunately for Milenan, I'd cut a deal there long before he'd thought of opening negotiations.

"Regardless of all that, I think we can safely discard the possibility that the crusaders don't know about the fairy gates and the Hunt," I said. "The trap doesn't work otherwise."

Without cutting through Arcadia, it would take my men weeks to get close enough to Harrow for a battle. Long after the rest of the crusader army caught up to the vanguard.

"And that puts a lot of their behaviour up until now in question," Juniper grunted. "I'm having a hard time reconciling a general clever enough for this kind of snare and one who'd willingly take her army through a bottleneck – especially one she knows we might have been able to seize the end of."

To be frank, trying to hold a narrow pass against a company of heroes would have been godsdamned ugly work. But I had the Named and the trump cards to be able to make a solid try at it, and if we did manage to hold then the entire invasion plan collapsed. Which meant, most likely, that we'd missed something.

"If this trap is not Malanza's own notion," Talbot tried. "Then your estimation of her competence might be. . . "

"Believe me," I interrupted quietly. "I'd love to have an idiot in charge on the other side. But that's genuinely not feasible, not with Hasenbach running the show in Procer. She doesn't want this army to do *too* well, but she's still banking on a victory. That means whoever holds the reins of the soldiers knows what they're doing."

"Without alleging incompetence, the information they're using might be imperfect," Thief said. "There's not a lot of reliable witnesses outside our most loyal for how quickly we can move through gates. She might have been under the impression that even by Arcadia you wouldn't be able to arrive in time to hold the pass."

"If we're lucky, that's the case," Juniper said.

"If we're not – and let's be honest, when have we been that lucky? – I think we have to proceed under the assumption that they're sitting on something that would have blown us away at the pass," I said.

"Proceran sorcery is nothing like the Wasteland's," Talbot said.

"Sorcery is the least of our troubles," I said. "This is a *crusade*. The Choirs aren't shy about stacking the deck even when it's just skirmishes between

Named. For something of this magnitude they'll have taken out the good silver."

That saw grim looks bloom across the table, with good reason. No one had forgotten the kind of threat the Lone Swordsman had been able to cause in Liesse with just a few days and a singe angelic feather. *And Masego tells me Contrition isn't exactly head of the pack when it comes to the Choirs*, I thought. *If Judgement or Mercy gets involved, this will be a whole lot nastier*.

"It goes without saying we have to reassess a lot of our engagement doctrine," Juniper announced bluntly. "Which is why I think we need to dust off Headsman."

"It's not going to look good abroad if we pull the trigger on that," I grimaced.

"I made it clear when we killed the plan that I considered it a measured and reasonable response," Talbot noted. "The Dread Empire has signed no treaties barring the targeting of officers, and while the Principate *has* they've never enforced the terms unless it suited them."

"If we want a seat at the table by the end of this, people, we can't act like Praes," I reminded them. "There's a reason we didn't spend the last year scrabbling for every destructive artefact and ritual we could get our hands on. We start using shit like the Dark Days protocols and the only peace we're getting is after one side has been pounded into dust."

"No one's dumping alchemy into rivers," the Hellhound said. "We're talking two hundred dead at most, including projected collaterals."

"We made those projections before we knew how many heroes there'd be on the other side," I pointed out. "I'm not refusing out of hand, Juniper, but if we start using assassination campaigns then we get a reputation that might cost us more in the long term than we gain in the short term."

"If you have another way to shake them before battle, I'm listening," she said. "Look, I don't give a damn about the politics of this. I'll own that. But I think the hole we fall in if we lose is a lot deeper than the one we dig with Headsman."

She wasn't wrong about that, even if I didn't like it. Hasenbach would have absolutely no interest in negotiating the kind of peace I was after if she had me on the ropes.

"Talk with Kegan," I finally said. "She was never eager, and it's not a given she'll still be willing. There's risks involved for her people. If she agrees, though, start laying the groundwork. But we're not going through with it until I give the word."

"Chances of success improve significantly if we don't wait," Thief said, tone mild. "Especially given the amount of heroes they've got floating around."

"It also kills every other option than pitched battle to get the crusaders out of Callow," I flatly replied. "I'm not committing to that unless I have no other choice."

"As you say," Vivienne shrugged. "That still leaves our little problem in Harrow."

"I realize we're dealing with a trap," Talbot said. "That said, Your Majesty, if we don't thin their horse soon we're going to have trouble."

I raised an eyebrow at Juniper in silent invitation.

"He's right," she admitted. "If Malanza moves against us with the meat of her host and peels off a few thousand horsemen just before, the only assets we have to check them are assets we're going to need in that battle."

"What kind of damage are we looking at?" I grimaced.

"If Darlington flips, or even just stays out of the way, they've got free rein until Southpool," the Hellhound said. "If they move quick enough, they could possibly hit central Callow before Adjutant manages to force a battle. Our forces just aren't deployed to block raiding parties coming from up north. Even if I pull the garrison from Vale tonight, there's no guarantee it'll get there in time."

"We have watchers on Darlington," I told her. "He's not changing sides anytime soon."

"I understand we are worrying about the devastation the riders could cause in the countryside," Talbot said slowly. "Yet it occurs to me there is another possible target for a detachment. The Red Flower Vales."

I almost dismissed him out of hand. A few thousand horse wasn't going to worry Black in the slightest, considering the kind of forces he had at hand. On the other hand, what if they *didn't* fight Black?

"The supply lines," I said.

"It would be risky," the Grandmaster said. "Hostile territory, and they'll be within our scrying net – though they might not know about that yet, at least not for certain. But the Carrion Lord is already heavily outnumbered, Your Majesty. Can he afford to detach the men to keep his supply lines clear?"

"He's been stacking food, munitions and steel for almost a year now," I said, but it was half-hearted.

"We lose the Vales, our entire defence collapses," Juniper said. "We have contingencies in case they lose, Catherine, but none of them involved fighting up here at the same time. None of us saw the passage coming."

Shit. I hadn't thought of that. Which was exactly the point of these councils, I supposed.

"Juniper, I know this is a lot to ask but I need. . . "

"You need me to get close enough that if this is Malanza's intent she will send off the horse, then avoid battle until you've dealt with the threat," the orc said.

"Is it possible?" I asked.

"You did not appoint me Marshal of Callow because I look good in furs," the Hellhound grinned, slow and savage. "You will have the margin you need."

I'd made a few good decisions, over the years, but none that'd paid off quite as much as offering her that draw back at the War College. I smiled gratefully at her, not that she seemed particularly moved by that gratitude.

"There is one last matter to address," Vivienne said.

I nodded.

"Prince Milenan attempted to arrange a meeting with Baron Darlington through his envoy," I said. "That means I'll be away from the army for a while."

"I don't follow," Talbot frowned.

"He wants to talk to a Callowan?" I smiled thinly. "Well, he's going to get his wish. It's about time we had a closer look at the opposition."

—

It took three weeks for the meeting to become feasible. Three weeks where we watched the crusader host slowly move south, camp at Harrow for a few days and then resuming the march when it become clear my own army wouldn't march to meet it. They were still at least a month of march away from Hedges, at their current pace, but we wouldn't be letting them get that deep into Callow unchallenged. The border between the baronies was the battlefield Juniper had picked, and I'd seen no reason to gainsay her on that. We had scouts out on the green to find us the kind of field that would best play up our advantages, but for now the location was still in the air. It'd been tempting to grab and interrogate Prince Milenan's envoy, for a plethora of reasons. The strongest among them that if Milenan hadn't known about the pass – and we were reasonably sure he hadn't – then he'd sent that envoy months ago and trusted her judgement enough she would have been able to negotiate in his name without being in contact afterwards. Plenipotentiary authority was not something Procerans gave lightly, and she would have been a treasure trove of information. But that would have been giving the game too early, so instead Baron Henry Darlington was given strict instructions and arranged the meeting where and when I wanted it.

He wasn't going himself, of course. The envoy had not requested as much, understanding that with my army camped outside his city his absence would not go unnoticed. Instead he'd sent his nephew, an anointed knight who stood fourth in the line of succession for Hedges and was young enough to be unmarried. The other diplomats were people Thief had gauged we had enough leverage over they wouldn't speak up, including a small escort. Of which I was part, riding a still-living horse for the first time in quite a while. The possibility of heroic presence had meant it was necessary for me to take some additional precautions, but those wouldn't come out of the woodworks unless blades left the scabbard. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. We were fewer than twenty all in all, and dawn found us out in the wet plains waiting for the other side to arrive. The nephew – Julian Darlington – had insisted we get a fire started for cooking before the Procerans came and I'd declined to speak against it.

I sat on a hollow log I'd dragged by the fire, surrounded by men too visibly scared of me to attempt conversation. I didn't particularly mind, since I was in not in a talkative mood myself. Milenan's envoys arrived half a bell later, riding in on tall steeds. I raised an eyebrow at the Darlington nephew and he hurried to raise the truce banner as we all got to our feet. The anointed knight stood behind a pair of guards but positioned himself clearly as the leader for

our side while the Procerans approached. I watched them as discretely as I could. The one in the gilded armour seemed in charge, and from the looks of his nose I could guess why. The Jacks had gotten their hands on a few sketches of Amadis Milenan's likeness, and the resemblance was noticeable. A kinsman, then. The Prince of Iserre was taking this seriously. Most the others were soldiers, with only one woman bearing a scrivener's kit over her back. Only one man wore entirely unadorned clothes, a loose grey robe that seemed almost a priest's garment. I kept my face schooled into mild boredom.

If that wasn't the Grey Pilgrim, I'd eat my hand.

Julian Darlington greeted them warily, and was answered by the man who confirmed himself to be highborn – and a Milenan, too. Likely a cousin or a close branch family. Elaborate courtesies were offered by the Proceran side while the Callowans offered stilted greetings in return. It wasn't long before they got to the meat of the meeting, as I suspected neither of them were comfortable speaking in the open like this. The Proceran envoy and Darlington strode off away from the rest, standing side by side and speaking in low voices. No matter. I could hear them well enough from where I was, back sitting on the log as the soldiers all stood down.

"-the duty of all children of the Heavens to deliver their fellows from the tyranny of the Tower's get, of course. Still, there are practical necessities to be addressed."

"May I?"

The Grey Pilgrim stood before me, hand gesturing at the log.

"By all means," I replied.

Did he know? It shouldn't be the case. I was wearing leathers and mail with a Callowan-forged longsword, nothing out of the ordinary for a retainer. And without drawing on Winter or him actively looking for it, he shouldn't be able to tell I bore a mantle. Assuming he didn't have some sort of trick that allowed him to see through those things, anyway. Something I was less certain of by the moment. The old man gingerly sat at my side, warming his hands by the fire. It was my first time seeing a Levantine, and I had to admit they really did look like the cousins of Taghreb. This one was darker in skin, though, his face tanned and leathery. But the limpid blue eyes were sharp, and for someone as old as he allegedly was he displayed surprising vitality. The few tufts of white hair on his head made a makeshift crown, but his face was either hairless or very closely shaved.

"Nothing quite like a fire on a cool morning, is there?" he sighed.

"One of the little pleasures in life," I agreed.

Or it had been, before Second Liesse. Nowadays neither heat nor cold made much of a difference.

"The truce banner," the Grey Pilgrim said mildly. "Is it genuine?"

My fingers clenched. So much for being unnoticed. *And he's distracting me from overhearing what his people are saying to mine*. I'd have to let that go, irritating as it was. This was the more important conversion of the two.

"It holds," I said.

"There have been rumours you care little for such arrangements," he noted.

I grimaced. Three Hills, when I'd had the Exiled Prince shot.

"I was younger, then," I said. "And no banner was raised."

He hummed, and did not disagree.

"Then your friends in Arcadia will not be joining us?" he politely asked.

Well, shit. So much for that remaining quiet.

"No unless that is made necessary," I replied.

"It won't," the Grey Pilgrim said, with bedrock certainty. "Shall we have a talk then, Catherine Foundling?"

My eyes narrowed.

"We're about due," I agreed.

Chapter 8

Dialogue

> "That is the secret to a peaceful court, Chancellor. Regularly having the High Lords for dinner."
>
> Dread Empress Sanguinia I, the Gourmet

"This is quite refreshing," I admitted. "My experience with your side doesn't involve a lot of talking. Or at least none that didn't end with blades drawn."

The Grey Pilgrim didn't seem particularly offended, but then he'd never lost that vaguely serene look since I'd first had glimpse of him. Might be part of his Name. *Or just the result of having seen shit that would turn my hair white.* No one made profession of kickin villains in the teeth for over six decades without having stumbled over some old horrors.

"There are few interlocutors worth speaking to, on… 'your side', as you so delicately put it," the old man replied. "One cannot bargain with madmen and minions."

"Yet here we are, talking," I said. "Should I take that as a compliment?"

He laughed quietly.

"If you wish," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though I will not deny that Winter's shadow looming in your soul is cause for worry, you have displayed noticeable restraint. I am not in the habit of seeking conflict when other roads are open."

Couldn't say the same, so I wouldn't. Just because I'd learned that killing often caused as many problems as it solved didn't mean I no longer recognized that there were fights worth picking. I should know, I'd yet to manage a gods-damned year as a Named where I wasn't up to my neck in enemies.

"Funny thing to say, for a man marching with an invading army," I noted. "If envoys were sent to achieve diplomatic resolution, they never made it to Laure."

"And this surprises you?" he asked, seeming genuinely curious. "You have hacked your way through every opposition set before you, and twice now slighted the Heavens through their ordained servants. There are few, mundane or Bestowed, who believe you can be reasoned with."

Bestowed. I raised an eyebrow. Another word for Named, I'd assume, but from the almost reverent way he'd spoken it there might be religious implications. More worrying was the fact that he knew how my little tiff with the Stalwart Paladin had ended. There shouldn't have been any remaining witnesses to that aside those who wore gaudy wings.

"Look at the graves I've left behind," I said. "What do they all have in common?"

The Exiled Prince, Page, the Lone Swordsman and his band, Diabolist. The pattern there was far from a puzzle.

"They were threats to the Kingdom of Callow," the old man said. "Or at least what you perceive that should be."

That last qualifier didn't escape my notice, but I reluctantly let it go. Heroes would be heroes.

"And so that's the question," I said. "What *is* your merry band of comrades after? Somehow I'm guessing Proceran interests aren't why you signed on with this crusade."

"The Empire crafted a doomsday weapon that would have held all of Calernia hostage to the Tower's whims," he mildly said.

"Weapon's broken," I said calmly. "So's the one who made it. You're still invading."

"The capacity to create another remains," he pointed out.

I hummed.

"All right," I said. "Fine. If that's all then let's get this done. Bring your army south, I'll take the lot of you through Arcadia and bring you out on the outskirts of Ater. You can level the Tower and put to the sword every mage in Praes who has the know-how and inclination to make another Liesse. Hells, ask nicely and I'll lend a hand."

He blinked, and the serenity fractured.

"You are not lying," he said, sounding baffled.

"Pilgrim, you think I *approve* of any of this shit?" I flatly said. "It's my people who got bled for that weapon. I signed on with Evil to personally put a knife through the eye of anyone intending to pull this kind of play on Callow, among other things. You want to bring down the Tower on Malicia's head? After last year, you can be my guest."

"And your mentor in the Vales?" he pressed.

"Was the one who broke the weapon in the first place," I said. "Someone's going to need to settle Praes after the bloodletting, and if you have a better candidate I'm all ears."

He opened his mouth and I raised my hand to signal he should let me finish.

"I don't mean forever," I said. "But if you approach Black with an offer that gives him say... ten years? A solid decade to make Praes into the kind of nation that'll no longer piss in the continental porridge every generation, before he abdicates, I think you'll be surprised by the answer you'll get. Even if heroic supervision is part of the terms."

His eyes narrowed.

"You genuinely believe this of the Carrion Lord," he said.

It wasn't a question. *Chalk one up to the man having a truth-telling ability*, I thought.

"With all due respect," I said, "I know him a lot better than you do. If he wanted a crown, he'd be wearing one right now. That's not what he's after. And as long as he gets what he wants, everything else is expendable – including personal power."

"This is... an unexpected offer," the Pilgrim admitted.

"It's one I'm willing to swear binding oath over," I bluntly told him. "The only real question is whether or not you can get Procer to turn around if I do."

"There are other considerations," the old man said.

I smiled thinly.

"Like a gaggle of princes wanting to carve Callow into their own little fiefdoms?" I said. "I'm honestly disappointed, Pilgrim. You're willing to kill your way through Callow so that likes of Amadis fucking Milenan gets his way?"

"I have been courteous to you, child," the Pilgrim spoke curtly. "A grace that should be returned equally. Has is truly escaped your notice how much of a threat you are?"

"Which of us is invading the other's country again?" I asked, then bit my tongue.

Losing my temper here would bring no gain.

"I... apologize," I said through gritted teeth. "Much of this tries my patience."

He nodded silently, the serenity back on his face.

"You are Queen of Callow," he said. "You are also a villain."

"Fucking Hells, am I tired of hearing that," I replied, anger immediately flaring again. So much for restraint. "I didn't sign on with the side that tosses around demons out of great sympathy for their philosophy, Pilgrim. I did it because I could not find a single other working alternative. Where was this coalition of yours, twenty years ago? Where were all these upstanding heroes during the Conquest? You don't get to throw it in my face that I'm an evil when Evil was the only game in town. I may have failed spectacularly, but the other choices were either a doomed rebellion or just lying down and taking it. Callow crowned me because it's desperate, and it got this desperate because *help never came*."

"Simply by being who you are, you darken Creation," the Grey Pilgrim replied calmly.

My fingers clenched, but he raised his hand to prevent the harsh reply on the tip of my tongue. Courtesy for courtesy, huh. I didn't like it, but I was willing to bend my neck that far.

"This is not a condemnation, it is a fact," the old man said. "You rule in Callow. Your story is its story. Already, I suspect, you will have seen the effects of this. Your people becoming warped by your presence, old traits grown more

vicious or acute. Whether you realize it or not, you are slowly turning your home towards the Gods Below. If you rule long enough, the Kingdom of Callow will sever its allegiance to Above."

But if losses must be had, better Proceran than Callowan, Brandon Talbot had said. Giving his approval to the slaughter of thousands. The chance the hero might have a point cooled my temper, but only so much.

"And that justifies killing people who still pray at the House of Light right now?" I replied. "Even assuming you're right – and I'm taking this with a grain of salt – if all the Heavens have to offer is a slaughter then, honestly, fuck the Heavens."

"Think, Black Queen," the Pilgrim grimly said "Beyond your anger and grudges, *think*. Of what it really means for all of Calernia if a nation as pivotal as Callow turns to Evil. Already, to be a hero is to be the corpse that will hold the dam in the face of the flood. If the Kingdom turns, the fragile balance of this continent breaks. Procer weakens. The Chain of Hunger and the Dead King will tear into its flesh, and when it dies darkness will spread across the land."

"What I'm getting from this," I coldly replied, "is that that keeping the Principate propped up – no matter what it does – matters more than the lives of innocents. If that's the argument your side is making, then you might just be praying in the wrong direction."

"All of this rests on the fact that it is you who rules," the old man said.

"And if I abdicate, can you guarantee that Callow will be left untouched?" I asked. "Will you swear on your Gods that if Procer tries to annex it, you will turn your sword on whoever is trying? Or even that you'll stay out of my way and let *me* take care of them?"

"I do not rule Procer," the Grey Pilgrim softly said. "And if I take the field against them, too many would follow. It would birth a war as dangerous as this one, in many ways."

I smiled bitterly.

"The terms I offered you have so many concessions in them I'd probably have to fight a civil war to enforce them," I frankly told him. "If even that isn't enough, then I think we can dispense with the pretence that there was ever anything but conflict on the table."

"And so now we are enemies, confirmed," the Grey Pilgrim said. "And you may unleash your arsenal of horrors with peace of mind."

I shook my head.

"That isn't the kind of war I'm going to be fighting," I said. "I've been down that road before. If I escalate, so do you. The thing is, you and I, we get to crawl out of those ruins. 'cause someone Above or Below decided we mattered enough. That courtesy isn't extended to nearly everyone on Calernia though, is it?"

I scoffed.

"Oh, I won't pretend I'm not sitting on some nasty stuff. So are you. But even if I used it, even if I won, what would that accomplish? I bleed Procer into a truce, but that truce doesn't survive me. All that does is kick the next war thirty years down the line. Nothing is *solved*. I'm tired of seeing Callow turned into the battlefield of Calernia, Pilgrim. So are Callowans."

"Heed an old man's advice, Catherine Foundling," the Pilgrim said tiredly. "The world can only be healed so much."

"I don't believe that," I said. "My teacher dedicated his entire life to breaking this game, but that's a reflection of his flaw – he can't conceive a world where he doesn't win. I'm willing to settle for the lesser prize. What I can't break, I would *regulate*."

"Some might construe such a boast as blasphemy," the old man said.

"Aren't you tired of killing kids because they're sworn to the wrong side?" I asked quietly. "I know I am, and you've been at this for a lot longer."

"There is not a single life I've taken I have not regretted," the Grey Pilgrim sighed. "No matter the deeds to their name. To inflict death is to end the possibility of redemption, and that is the greatest gift the Gods have granted us."

"It doesn't *need* to be like this," I said. "We're the dogs in the pit, but what does that ever really accomplish? One bleeds, another dies, and then they release another hound. The pit's still there even if one side gets a winning streak."

"Some of those hounds have gone rabid," the Pilgrim said. "I grieve their deaths, but I will not allow them to bite children."

"And those should be put down," I agreed flatly. "But we don't need wars for that. We just need rules that both sides are willing to enforce."

"An agreement," he slowly said. "Such a thing would be without precedent. And there are many who would balk."

"Every single Named is a highly dangerous weapon, in their own way," I said. "Any unwilling to accept constraints placed on their actions have no business wielding that kind of power in the first place. And before you ask, I do not exclude myself or any ally of mine from that statement."

He studied me silently.

"For such a thing to hold, there would be need for trust where none exists," he said.

"Then we begin with something smaller," I said. "Rules of engagement, for your host and mine. Would you be able to enforce these?"

"Within limits," he said. "I am not without influence and the Saint's reputation has its uses."

"If you don't sack cities, neither will I," I offered.

He nodded.

"Agreed," he said. "Innocents should not be made to suffer. You must refrain from using demons."

"I'll swear to that, if you refrain from calling on angels," I said.

He frowned.

"The nature of those interventions is different," he said. "The Choirs are not a blight, their purpose is to aid in the rectification of wrongs."

"There kind of r*ectification* they would have offered at Liesse when the Lone Swordsman reached for Contrition was a wrong itself," I flatly told him. "It was ugly as the things the Empire pulls. And that's besides the point, anyway: if you use something of that scale, then I have to deploy an equivalent or you're just going to walk right through us."

"The Choirs have been known to extend hand when defeat looms," the Pilgrim told me. "There is difference between call and offer."

"You think your side's the only one afraid of dying?" I said. "Calling demons is probably the single worst thing a person can do, objectively speaking, but it feels a lot more acceptable when the alternative is getting stabbed in the throat. We can't prevent escalation if your bargaining position is that we fold but you don't."

The old man stayed silent for a long while.

"I will concede," he finally said, "if you swear away devils as well."

No great loss for me there. I'd never approved of using those either.

"Done," I grunted. "As a gesture of goodwill, I'll add a warning. There's a demon from Dread Empress Triumphant's day bound somewhere in the vicinity of Harrow. My people believe it might be one of Absence."

"A Hell Egg, after all these years?" he said, brow rising. "I thought none remained within Callow."

"Would that this were true," I ruefully said. "I don't know exactly where it is, or what keeps it bound. Odds are it's an old Legion standard but I can't guarantee it."

He inclined his head in thanks.

"I will discuss this with the others," the Pilgrim said. "If we can slay it, we will."

"So long as you keep the fight *contained*," I sharply said. "If a chunk of the north suddenly no longer exists, I'll consider that a breach of terms."

"If have fought their like before," the old man said. "It is ugly strife, but there are ways about it."

I didn't like the risks involved in this, but then I wasn't all that happy about that unlit sharper staying buried near Harrow either. If they could kill it without making a mess I wasn't going to complain. If.

"I want prisoners well treated, even Praesi and greenskins," I said. "Neither beaten, tortured nor otherwise harmed. I'll extend the same treatment to anyone I capture. I'm also willing to arrange regular prisoner exchanges when the campaign allows."

"There are evils I have been forced to make peace with," the Pilgrim said with iron in his voice. "Torture is not one of them. You may be certain I will allow no such thing so long as I draw breath. The matter of exchanges, however, will have to be discussed with the Princess of Aequitan. Answer will be given before battle."

I nodded. I wasn't sure Malanza would bite but it was worth a try. Morality aside, I needed my officers much more badly than she did hers. If she cottoned on to that she might just decide to sit on them. On the other hand, the Procerans tended to make officers of their relatives. They might want the assurance of being traded back if they got captured. We'd see.

"No killing of anyone offering surrender," I proposed.

"So long as that surrender is genuine, and no attempt at treachery is made," he countered.

I grimaced but nodded. Fair enough. I'd need to ride my sappers hard about the treachery clause in case they ever got captured. They did like to offer 'surrender' in time for the enemy to walk into a field of buried munitions.

"Those are the terms I have to offer, at the moment," I said. "Unless you have anything to add?"

"No," he said, after a moment. "This will serve."

He sighed.

"You are right, you know," he said quietly.

I had a few pithy responses to offer, but I kept my mouth shut. And to think they said I couldn't do diplomacy.

"It is shameful, that Callow was left under occupation for so long," the Grey Pilgrim said. "That we only ride to relieve in in fear of what your coronation represents."

Limpid blue eyes looked up at the morning sky.

"This does not absolve you," he said. "But there is truth in what you say. We stand burdened with the guilt of inaction. For that alone, I grieve that it must come to blood. You are the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us."

"I don't want to fight you at all," I said. "But I will not bend my neck to the kind of ending you peddle."

He sighed.

"We will try to slay you, on the field," he said. "Even I. Much suffering can be avoided by your death, however tragic that ending."

"Suffering is the nature of human condition," I said. "We are what we do with that. I choose to give it a purpose."

"It does not sound," he gently said, "like I am the one you are trying to convince."

"None of that, now," I said, wagging my finger. "You want to fight for a side that's not exactly driven snow? Fine. Disappointing, but that's the world we live in. But you don't get to pull the grandfatherly act afterwards."

He smiled sadly.

"Am I not allowed to grieve the sight of a child who mutilated her own soul trying to make a better world?" he asked.

I flinched. That struck closer to home than I would have liked.

"I am my mistakes too," I said. "Not just my victories. And I knew going in that power comes at a cost. No one gets to eat the first course then balk at the bill. Grieve all you want, but someone recently told me that grief without

corresponding action is meaningless. That applies to both sides of the fence, I'd think."

"All your plans," he said. "They are dust, if you do not survive to attempt them. All that would be left is the costs."

"Isn't that always how it is?" I tiredly replied. "There's a reason it goes 'change the world or *die trying*'."

And on that cheerful note my first talk with the opposition concluded.

Bonus Chapter: Court I

> "Ruling is to promise a man a boat and his brother the river while owning neither."
>
> Kind Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"This Liessen business is fucking unacceptable, Brandon," the woman said, fist pounding the table.

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot of the Order of Broken Bells, arguably the second most influential officer in the Army of Callow after the Marshal herself, hid his displeasure with the ease of long practice. Though he understood Lady Julienne's outrage, and indeed shared it himself, theatrics such as these would get them absolutely nowhere.

"This reeks of Kendall's doing," Samuel Farron said. "She's been gathering the malcontents under her banner, and now she'll get an entire duchy to hand out piecemeal."

The man was the oldest among them, and though his grandfather had been only a baron in the days before the Conquest he was perhaps the most influential of the Regals – who boasted men and women of greater lines, not the least Brandon himself. What his line had lost in title, they had reclaimed in wealth and alliances. This did nothing to make him any more likeable, no matter how useful he might be: Samuel Farron had learned the unfortunate lesson that he was always right, and grew indignant whenever Creation had the gall to disagree with that state of affairs.

"Chewing off Brandon's ear gets us nowhere, my friends," Valerie Hadley calmly intervened. "You have all read the proposed arrangements. I suspect this comes from higher up than the Governess-General."

The unspoken shadow of the queen brought silence, however short, and Brandon nodded his thanks at the woman who had just spoken. House Hadley had been middling retainers to the Marquesses of Vale once, little more than jumped up landed knights, but of all the Regals it was Valerie Hadley that Brandon most enjoyed working with. The calm competence married to stark humility was refreshing, considering some of the egos he must corral. Her seat in this council of the greatest of the Regals came more because she was the only person of note from Vale to have joined them than because of her skills,

unfortunately. Something Farron was not above reminding her of whenever they disagreed, which was frequently.

"The queen's not used to thinking in terms of land," Samuel replied flatly. "She was a damned penniless orphan for most her life. This is Anne Kendall trying to fuck us, and anyone who's not a fool can see it."

"Clearly I am a fool, then," Hadley said. "For the fact that land grants would in large part go to retiring legionaries does not strike as a ploy of the Queen's Men."

"Greenskin and Praesi owning Callowan land, this is what the court had simmering," Lady Julienne sharply said. "I held my tongue when the queen settled goblins in Marchford, Brandon, because it is her demesne and you raised no objection. But this? This goes too far."

I held my tongue because objecting would have served no purpose but irritating Her Majesty, Brandon thought. *And because the Snake Eater Tribe brought us both badly needed coin and a workforce capable of making siege weapons without relying on the Tower's charity.* Neither thought had it made it more palatable that lands by House Talbot for over five hundred years were now infested with skulking vermin, but the Grandmaster had learned early that the queen's tolerance for protest only stretched so far.

"Lodging protest through the court is not possible," Brandon sighed.

None of them were supposed to have even seen the proposal they were now discussing, though a concerned citizen had written a copy from memory and sent it to them. Someone would be sent to the gallows before the day was done, if Catherine Foundling believed her own court was leaking documents under seal.

"We can express our displeasure through intermediaries," Samuel Farron said. "Nothing touching us directly."

"If we do we'll be swimming in Jacks before the next bell," Lady Julienne grunted. "I don't know about you, but I'm tired of finding my good bottles open and my papers slightly askew."

Brandon grimaced. He had already expressed to Lady Thief his misgivings about these little reminders to the Regals that they were being watched, but the Named had only been amused. *It's good for fine folk such as you to be reminded about the consequences of wickedness*, she'd said. His favourite hunting knife had disappeared the same night, though Lord Deadhand had later returned it with a seemingly sincere apology.

"We can't do *nothing*, Julienne," Farron barked. "I will not watch silently as Callow is handed away piece by piece to foreigners and toadies."

"He's right," Valerie Hadley reluctantly said. "Her Majesty's open favour already emboldens the Queen's Men. If we stay our hand on so large a matter, we will suffer defections."

"Favoured or not, the queen has been... pragmatic on the issue of Baroness Kendall's supporters," Brandon reminded them. "One of ours leads the city guard in Summerholm, and we hold the docks in Southpool. My attempts to

broach the matter of the governorship in Denier have not been rebuffed, either. I question the wisdom of surrendering a gain so close to our hand for what promises to be a losing battle."

"So she hasn't outright handed the keys to the kingdom to some southern collaborator," Lady Julienne snorted. "Must we must praise Her Majesty for this? She's still having her Taghreb dig into our coffers."

Considering none but Brandon at this table was not a landowner of more than comfortable means, the Bastard Lord's property taxes had gotten stuck in the throat of most Regals. That the baronies in the north had been spared the sword by virtue of still being true nobles had only added insult to injury. It'd been bad enough there had been talk of arranging the Taghreb's disappearance, but Brandon had been uncompromising in squashing such scheming. Her Majesty was viciously protective of any she considered friends, and striking at a man who'd followed her since her early days as the Squire was a recipe for every Regal in Callow swinging from a noose. And that was assuming the mood did not take her to make another example, as she had of the sorcerers sworn to the Diabolist. Brandon had ridden down the Road of Woe, before they took the corpses down. He still shivered at the memory of bloodied corpses propped up as milestones as far as the eye could see. None of the other Regals had been on the Arcadian Campaign, or Second Liesse. They did not know the kind of monstrosity the queen was willing to unleash when she believed herself threated.

"She's shutting us out of the army too," Samuel Farron growled. "I'm getting tired of having fine officers refused by a fucking *greenskin*."

"We *cannot* try to force that," Hadley said. "You should know this by now, Samuel. I'm not happy nearly all the senior officers are former Legion either, but she won the throne with the Fifteenth at her back. If we try to wedge ourselves into that, we chance Her Majesty seeing it as an attack."

"A certain level of intrigue will be tolerated, that much has been made clear," Brandon said. "But let it always remain polite and lawful. Let us not forget the ending of that... ill-considered attempt to bribe the Lord Treasurer."

The queen's mercy in that matter had almost been cruel, he thought. The fines had ruined the eldermen financially and the mark of the throne's wroth had ensured they would never hold a position of influence ever again. Considering the rising influence of officials in Laure, having been kicked off the boat just as the tide began to lift it must have stung even worse than the gallows.

"Petty Laure officials," Farron scoffed. "Mudfoots with no sophistication. That game is played with favours, not coin. We just need to find out what the orc is truly after and she'll bargain like everyone else."

Brandon Talbot had campaigned with Marshal Juniper twice now, and he suspected on most days what the Hellhound desired most was Samuel Farron's guts on her plate. It was not worth the expense of his influence to try to end an initiative that might yield some success, however. Down the line it could be suggested to the queen that reverses in other matters might be reconciled by some... strategic appointments in the Army of Callow. Having candidates

already on the record would only strengthen their position. Already Brandon's freedom to do as he saw fit with the Broken Bells had been expanded greatly, so it was not a matter without precedent.

"We're certain that Her Majesty raising a new Duke of Liesse is out of question?" Hadley pressed. "I know inquiries were made, but we never petitioned the court."

The queen had to be talked out of striking down the titles to the northern baronies, Brandon thought. *No duchy will be raised in her lifetime, my friend. That one is a lost cause.*

"Given the involvement of Lord Adjutant's new offices with the refugees, I suspect it would come too close to curtailing the crown's power to be even seriously considered," Talbot admitted. "And while I share your disdain for this notion of turning the entire Duchy of Liesse into freeholds, we must admit that the region had been well taken in hand."

Grain, tents and clothes had begun flowing south within hours of the queen's coronation. The Deadhand was nothing if not efficient, that much must be conceded. That about nine in ten refugees had so far survived winter in the face of cold and starvation was nearly miraculous. Even if that miracle had been woven from Praesi gold.

"They screwed Old Darlington out of making a killing with his wool, too," Lady Julienne smiled coldly. "Always a pleasure to see we are not lowest in the queen's esteem."

"There is only so much distinction between bottom-feeders," Valerie Hadley said. "We have shown restraint, Brandon, but our gains remain limited. I am not fool enough to talk rebellion, but something must be done."

There was a thread of frustration in the woman's voice, and the Grandmaster sympathized. He felt it too. Yet he also knew that what they considered stewardship of Callow earned by right and blood was seen by Her Majesty as infuriating arrogance. Now that peace had returned, however fleeting, the queen had ceased putting the heads of all opposition on pikes. Farron and Lady Julienne saw this as their ruler softening, but Brandon knew better. The Queen of Callow was trying to outgrow the savage teachings of her eastern mentors and return Callow to what it should be, but all she did she did with an eye on the looming war with Procer. Disagreement would be tolerated, but anything construed as obstructionism would see the blades come out.

"We are only worth appeasing so long as we are more useful than troublesome, my friends," Brandon quietly said. "We should all remember that, before raising our voices too loud. Catherine Foundling is not a Fairfax. She will not balk at sending the Jacks to abduct us in the middle of the night, if she deems it necessary."

"Then she shouldn't be-" Farron began, but Hadley smacker her palm against the table.

"Let us not drift too far from the subject at hand," the woman said. "Brandon, by your continuing calm I take it you have a notion as to how we should

proceed?"

"Tolerance continues so long as we remain within set bounds," Brandon said. "Let us wok within these bounds, then. Anne Kendall is no friend of ours, but there is one that stands above even the Queen's Council. One who takes no sides."

The others watched him with considering eyes.

"I will talk," Brandon Talbot said, "with Hakram Deadhand."

—

There were too few hours in a day. Hakram had, on one of those rare instances where Archer managed to drag Masego away from supervising he building of the Observatory, asked Hierophant if it was feasible to work in Arcadia to get around the span of time. He'd said yes, then added so many qualifiers to that agreement the conversation became unintelligible. Unfortunate. Instead he'd gotten to explore the limits of how little sleep he could live on before becoming sloppy. The orc poured himself a cup of aragh and shuffled through the piles on parchment on his oaken desk.

"Drinking on the job, Hakram?" Ratface teased. "How irresponsible of you."

The orc growled, not that it scared the fucking Taghreb. The former quartermaster had not become any less of a pest now that some Callowan honorary address had been tacked on to his name.

"Can't drink with Catherine anymore," he admitted. "I'm trying to wean her off."

Amusement slid off the Lord Treasurer's face.

"I know she's traded wine for liquor since Liesse, but I was under the impression Named couldn't get drunk unless they wanted to," the man said.

"Her body's all fucked," Hakram said. "The warlock's get wants to write a treatise about it, which should tell you everything. I think it takes the edge off Winter, though. And there's not much else that accomplishes that."

"We never talked about what went down in the city," Ratface slowly said. "But what bits I dug up hint it was... bad."

"Malicia crossed a line," Hakram said. "And the Black Knight broke her trust. The second of those cut a lot deeper."

"There is an old story, I believe, about scorpions and trust," Ratface murmured.

More than one, as it happened. The one they told in Callow was charmingly moral, a warning about men's nature and how they followed it even at their own expense. The Praesi tale was not a warning but a lesson: the scorpion swam to the shore, after stinging the frog. *Never assume weakness, never trust anyone with your back*. Like most Praesi stories it idolized cleverness and treachery without addressing the inherent stupidity of killing someone willing to help you.

"We've all had mentors," Hakram said. "Smart doesn't come into it."

"Let us hope Procer ties up that loose end, then," the Taghreb said. "We cannot afford to be stung twice."

The orc drank from the cup, savouring the muted burn down his throat, and rolled his shoulders.

"All right, spit it out," Adjutant said. "What are you after, Lord Treasurer?"

The olive-skinned man cast a dubious glance at the sheaths of parchment and opened scrolls that covered nearly every surface of Hakram's solar.

"If I asked you for a report, would you even be able to find it?" he snorted.

"Finding's a specialty of mine," the orc replied with a fanged grin. "Now spare me the dancing around."

The Taghreb sighed.

"This cannot be put to ink," he said.

Hakram's hairless brows rose. The Jacks were being forced to keep much off parchment out of fear of Imperial infiltration – particularly Vivienne's people since there was a decent choice the Eyes *didn't* know who those were, unlike most their other spies – but Ratface did not often bring anything off the record.

"Your guildsmen or the friends in low places?" Adjutant asked.

Ratface shook his head.

"I had drinks with Pickler, a few nights ago," he said.

The orc's chin lowered, a hint of fangs revealed. With the Fifteenth being folded into the Army of Callow he hadn't seen much of the old crew lately, since the Hellhound was running them ragged. Pickler had it worst than most, trying to form a halfway decent expanded sapper corps out of Marchford goblins who'd never set foot at the College. That had seen her journeying back and forth to the settlement the Snake Eater Tribe had founded in Marchford, out of the tunnels the giant devil snake Catherine killed had dug. The rent the tribe offered had been badly needed income and goblin manpower was a balm now that the Empress had ended their recruiting rights in Praes – and therefore both the Steppes and the Eyries. They were a complication as well, though. Even on their best behaviour goblins tended to piss off humans, which was the last thing Callow needed at the moment, but there had also been... larger implications. The tribe currently had no proper Matron. It was ruled by a pack of matron-attendants until that could be settled, but if there was anyone out there who made Praesi looking like amateur dabblers at backstabbing it was female goblins. There was a reason for the lack of Matron, as he understood it.

Pickler's mother, the Matron of the High Ridge Tribe, intended for her daughter to retire from the Legions and lead the only goblin tribe living outside of the Grey Eyries.

Hakram suspected the amount of murder and backroom dealing that must have gone on for other Matrons to accept that was horrifying. Pickler had an edge over any candidate, admittedly, because of her close working relationship to the highest reaches of Callow. No other goblin would get half as much sufferance from Catherine. On the other hand, the Senior Sapper had run away to the War College exactly to be spared this kind of position. What Adjutant knew of goblin politics was sparse, mostly cobbled together form bitter comments Robber made when in his cups, but he'd gathered that Pickler was essentially the

goblin equivalent of a High Lady's daughter. If she'd stayed with High Ridge she'd be a matron-attendant by now, murdering her fellows in preparation for succeeding her mother. Apparently Matron Wither had decided to secure a tribe for her eldest daughter no matter how far she ran away. You could run from honours, but you couldn't run from blood. All orcs knew that, true as they knew their own breath.

"If they try to force her retirement just before a crusade there's going to be blood," Hakram grimly said.

"If that were the angle, I'd be less worried," Ratface murmured. "She was dragged into a meeting with the matron-attendants, where she was interrogated about Cat's intentions for the Empire if she ends up on top when the dust settles."

Hakram's breath caught. Did they know about the Accords? They'd just begun drafting them, it shouldn't be possible. If the Matrons knew then the Dread Empress might, and if Malicia learned about those...

"Some people might consider that treason," the orc said.

The Taghreb met his eyes squarely.

"I know her too, Hakram," he said. "She doesn't forgive things like Liesse. The Empress didn't make that doomsday weapon, but it doesn't take a High Lord to figure out she made a grab for it. There's a reason the Black Knight hasn't set foot in Praes since the battle."

There was much more to that than his old friend knew, but that was not knowledge to idly spread around.

"They're smelling weakness," the orc gravelled. "With the Carrion Lord estranged and Callow garrisoning borders, they think the Empress is on the way out."

"No deal was offered," Ratface cautioned. "People who underestimate Her Dread Majesty tend to turn up dead and the Matrons didn't last this long by being reckless. They're opportunists at heart."

"She hates them, Ratface," Hakram bluntly said. "She's fine with goblins, but the Matrons everything she despises about highborn incarnate. And I agree with her, frankly. They're snakes, and they'll bite us just as surely as they will the Empress if it gets them what they want."

"I am Taghreb," Ratface smiled coldly. "Bastard, but still Taghreb. We know the Matrons better than any of you, the dangers of getting into bed with them. But we don't *have* to get into bed with them. We just have to promise to stay out of it."

The orc grit his teeth.

"There's already too many moving parts in the Tenth Crusade," he finally said. "A goblin rebellion on top of it is tossing a sharper into the fire."

"Think on it," Ratface said. "Talk to her. But we can't dally for too long, if we're making overtures."

The Taghreb rose to his feet.

"A sharper's only ever trouble if you're the one it's tossed at," the Lord Treasurer said quietly.

Hakram grimaced. Ratface had never taken sapper courses, so he might not know that one sharper in twenty blew before ever making it into Imperial supply stores.

Adjutant did, and he thought the metaphor more apt for it.

Interlude: Crusaders

> "There is no absolute virtue to peace. To avoid war out of petty fear is the exact same moral failure as waging war in name of it."
>
> Clément Merovins, fourth First Prince of Procer

"They're up to something," Princess Rozala of Aequitan said.

She had, that very morning, received a second report on enemy movements that baffled her. Unlike Amadis, who already saw their victory as writ in the sky and was positioning to benefit from the aftermath, the only daughter of Aenor of Aequitan had made deep study of their enemy. Oh, the Prince of Iserre was not a fool. Ambitious beyond reason, perhaps, but no imbecile. He'd be much easier to deal with if he were. Yet he only ever saw war as the pursuit of political advantage through steel, and that blinded him to the nature of the foe before them. Rozala was an Arlesite of ancient line, and her kind were as distinguished with the sword as they were with verse. Her people had fought and fought well in almost every major war since the founding of the Principate, and the Malanzas had been famed as generals long before they rose to royalty. Which was why this 'Army of Callow' worried her. The Legions of Terror, in their current incarnation, were admittedly one of the finest military machines on Calernia – second in lethality perhaps only to the army of Helike, though much more numerous. Yet that was not what she was facing: more than half the Army of Callow was foot from that same kingdom, and more worryingly under the Black Queen's banner rode *knight*s.

Prince Papenheim had taught her mother a bloody lesson in the dangers of engaging heavy cavalry with light, at the Battle of Aisne. Rozala had no intention of repeating the mistakes that forced Aenor of Aequitan to drink mandrake extract. She had seen the aftermath of the Regal Kindness, and it was neither of those things.

"Praesi are known to have a certain low cunning," Prince Arnaud of Cantal mused. "No doubt they've some sort of parlour trick in the works."

Rozala eyed the middle-aged man with open distaste. The man was the living justification of every prejudice about Alamans arrogance, and she would have disliked him for that even if her agents had not learned about his... pro-

clivities. She was no Lycaonese prude, but someone taking a knife to that man's cock would have been a boon to Creation.

"We underestimate the Empire at our own risk," Princess Adeline of Orne sharply replied.

Rozala inclined her head in thanks and the other young woman offered the ghost of a smile in return. Adeline had already hinted that she was not so securely under Amadis' thumb as the prince seemed to believe, through subtle intermediaries. Of all the royals to have crossed the Stairway, the Princess of Aequitan was fondest of this one. Adeline had ruled Orne for less than a year now, ascending to the throne after the assassination of her brother at the hands of what was speculated to be the Assassin himself. The princess understood the dangers of tangling with the Tower better than most. She also despised the First Prince to the bone. The Augur had, after all, not seen fit to give warning about her beloved brother's coming death. Cordelia Hasenbach, they were learning, could kill simply by staying silent.

"It is unseemly for women of your standing to quake at the coming of the Carrion Lord's bastard," Prince Arnaud sneered.

Rozala's lips thinned. There were persistent rumours that the Black Queen was the villain's illegitimate daughter, though she put no more stock in those than the speculation she was some distant Fairfax spared after the Conquest and reared in secret over the decades that followed.

"It is unseemly for a 'man' of your standing to be such a relentless jackass, Arnaud," Princess Adeline replied with a lightness that belied the anger beneath it. "But you don't hear *us* snipe about it, do you?"

Rozala sighed almost inaudibly. The Princess of Orne needed to learn to leash her temper, else they would eat her alive in the Highest Assembly. An ally this easy to bait was more liability than grace. She would have intervened to soothe the tempers, but Amadis finally decided to grace them with his presence. He was not, she saw, alone. The kindly wizened face of the Grey Pilgrim was a welcome addition to this council, but the other silhouette flanking the Prince of Iserre was not. Laurence de Montfort was short and skinny, for so infamous a woman, and her creased cheeks were showing the mottled spots of creeping age. They did nothing to detract from the austere presence of the Saint of Swords. The Princess of Aequitan stiffened, though she forced her shoulders to loosen before anyone could notice. Not royalty could ever be comfortable in the presence of the Regicide.

"I do hope my lateness caused no offence," Amadis Milenan affably smiled. "It occurred to me that an infusion of wisdom to this council would benefit us all, hence my company."

The smile was a little too broad, Rozala decided, to be entirely truthful. Had the heroes strong-armed him into inviting them along? They had certainly begun wielding their influence more strongly since the crossing. For all that the Saint was the one who brought sharp discomfort, it had been the Grey Pilgrim

that brought terms back from the failed attempt at diplomacy in the south. The man was much more influential than his easy manners suggested.

"We are honoured to be offered seat at his table," the Pilgrim smiled, inclining his head.

"Honoured, yes," the Saint drawled, a hard smile splitting her face.

The Regicide had been exceedingly clear about her low esteem for royalty as a whole, which cast interesting light to the rumours she'd once been the lover of Klaus Papenheim. It would take someone with stomach as steady as the Iron Prince's to bed that one, Rozala silently conceded. For all they knew all there was down there was more swords, though for a Lycaonese that might just be spice in the wine.

"No offence at all," Prince Arnaud smiled brightly. "We always welcome the advice of those Chosen by the Heavens."

Rozala hid her derisive snort behind a sip of wine as the heroes and their glorious leader took their seats.

"Princess Rozala was expressing worries about Praesi scheming," Princess Adeline spoke up.

More to break the heavy silence than anything else, the ruler of Aequitan suspected. She did not grudge her the distraction.

"Ah," the Grey Pilgrim smiled gently. "Always a subject worthy of interest, yet I would caution you that it is not Praesi we face. It would be a mistake, Your Graces, to believe the army to the south anything but Callowan."

Rozala disliked the notion of taking military advice from priestly vagrant, however high his repute, but the circumstances warranted prudence. It was a villain that led the Army of Callow, and she knew little of their breed compared to the old man.

"Callowan she may be, but her throne was built on sand," Amadis languidly added. "Her grasp on the kingdom remains shallow. Duchess Kegan Iarsmai has already replied to my envoys."

Rozala hid her surprise. For all of Amadis' swagger, she'd fully expected the House of Iarsmai to remain aloof from the crusade until a clear winner could be discerned. The Prince of Iserre's smile broadened as he looked at her, the unspoken gloating ringing loud.

"Though she will not declare for us openly at the moment, she was willing to send a detachment of the Watch to join our forces," Amadis revealed. "They've already begun to sail across the Silver Lake, and I expect they will swell our ranks in time for battle."

The Arlesite princess frowned, displeased she'd been cut out of negotiations involving military matters.

"And how many of the Watch did she pledge?" she asked.

"A full thousand," Amadis said. "Easily worth thrice that number, if the old histories are to be believed."

And what did you have to promise that Deoraithe fox to get them, I wonder? Rozala thought. Amadis Milenan had been rather generous of late in partitioning the kingdom he expected her to conquer for him.

"You really should have been smacked more often as a child, Amadis," the Saint of Swords idly said. "Gods know a few bruises would have done wonders for your character."

The silence in the tent was so absolute it was nearly palpable. Rozala smothered a very unseemly grin.

"Pardon?" the Prince of Iserre coldly said.

"You heard me just fine, you repulsive little wart," Laurence de Montfort said. "Kegan Iarsmai fought a campaign with the Black Queen less than a year ago and you think that, what? Your viper tongue befuddled a *Duchess of Daoine*? That house was putting Praesi heads on pikes back when your ancestors were shitting in their own huts. She's playing you like a spectacularly dim fiddle."

Amadis Milenan's face purpled with fury. It was unlikely, Rozala mused with dark delight, that anyone had insulted him this bluntly even once in his life. The Grey Pilgrim cleared his throat.

"Laurence," he reproached.

The Saint of Swords sighed.

"Fine," she said. "The honourable Prince of Iserre is displaying the intellectual faculties of an *averagely* dim fiddle."

The Grey Pilgrim looked pained.

"What my blunt-spoken friend means, Your Grace," he intervened, "is that Catherine Foundling belongs to a very specific breed of villainy. The nature of her Bestowal is what my people call a *thresher*. One who separates the wheat from the chaff. She will earn great enmity, but also great loyalty. And she has fought by the side of Duchess Kegan before, against common foe."

Rozala was honest enough to admit that watching the Prince of Iserre having to swallow his cold fury to avoid beginning a feud with heroes was making her evening. Perhaps even her month.

"The Duchess bargained well," the prince stiffly said. "And extracted great concessions in rights and territory. The Queen of Callow has naught to offer of equivalent value."

So, land had been sold. Rozala wondered how far he'd gone. Had Laure been offered up? Denieralmost certainly, it was the old dagger the Fairfaxes had kept pointed at Daoine's belly in case the Deoraithe began talking of independence again. The Princess of Aequitan quietly cleared her throat, gaining everyone'd attention.

"I'll be blunt," she said. "The Black Queen should scare everyone in this tent. She has displayed surprising restraint so far, but this is the same woman who crucified a few hundred mages after the Doom to make a point. We are cornering her, and she has a reputation for baring her fangs when cornered."

Rozala sipped at her wine, drawing out her point in a reminder that in matters military it was her word that counted most.

"We marched out believing she'd come after the first bait we set out," she continued. "The failure of the trap at Harrow makes it very clear we were wrong in our assessment. And that is without considering she not only knew about the overtures to Baron Darlington, but turned that debacle into an offer of her own. I expected she scares the Duchess a lot more than we do, at the moment. Any contribution from her is suspect."

I'm not going to let you forget the Darlington failure any time soon, Amadis, she thought, smiling at the Prince of Iserre. *So much for the north rising up behind the Black Queen.*

"Making terms with the Enemy is always a fucking blunder," the Saint of Swords said. "Mark my words, the moment she feels the noose tightening the usual horrors are coming out. You should have smoked her then and there."

"She spoke truth, Laurence," the Grey Pilgrim stated, and there was iron beneath the mildness. "Do not gainsay me on this. I find it deeply shameful that any of us would hesitate at an opportunity to lessen the bloodbath, no matter the provenance."

"You've always been soft, Tariq," the Saint said. "The only thing I agree on with this band of clucking hens is that the east is in need of a good cleansing. The rot will only spread if we spare the flame. We go in half-hearted, and you know we'll have to come back in twenty years. Assuming we're still around."

Something pale and cold roiled in the Grey Pilgrim's eyes. Rozala felt the taste of a storm against the roof of her mouth. It unsettled her enough she spared no irritation for having been called a hen.

"You should know better," the hero quietly said, "than to question how far I will go to spare this world pain. You, of all people."

The old woman looked uncomfortable, then chastised. Rozala's eyes sharpened with interest. Of all the Named gathered under the banner of her army, these two were known to be first among equals. That they would quarrel at all had interesting implications. Until now, the politics of the heroes had been utterly opaque to her save for the fact that the other Levantines took the Pilgrim's words as sacred writ. All of the Named had resisted attempts to induce them into a deeper relationship so far, but if this rift before her was exploitable there were... possibilities to keep in mind. Known ties to a Chosen would silence her brother's ambitions for good, no matter his schemes.

"Apologies," the Saint finally said. "You know my temper."

"Like a bear with a bad tooth," the Pilgrim fondly said, patting her hand. "Already forgotten. We are all worried about the young ones in the south."

Princess Adeline cleared her throat daintily.

"Apologies, Chosen," she said. "But if I may ask, are you speaking of the heroes marching for the Vales?"

"I was under the impression the remaining Calamities were expected to fold," Rozala added warily.

If the Red Flower Vales held, their position up north became exceedingly precarious. Their supply lines would be effectively impossible to maintain as soon as they passed Hedges, and the First Prince had indicated she would be *displeased* if the crusaders turned to foraging in Callow. The Arlesite princess wasn't going to starve her army out of fear of offending Hasenbach, but she'd also rather avoid kicking that nest of wasps for a while still.

"In matters of might, the Carrion Lord is outmatched," the Pilgrim agreed. "So, we suspect, is the Warlock."

The Saint snorted inelegantly.

"The Witch is from Brocelian Forest," she said. "What she learned, she learned from the Gigantes. And that lot ruled the roost while the Praesi were still busy figuring what cocks are for. She'll pulp his ass across the valley floor, if they go spell for spell."

"Young Hanno has already fought the Black Knight once," the Pilgrim smiled. "He will not repeat previous mistakes. Yet the opponents are villains grown old, and this is a rare thing for a reason. It will not be an easy victory."

"The man is one of Ranger's toys," the Saint conceded. "And that ornery old bitch plays rough. He won't go down without making a mess."

The Levantine flicked an amused glance at his companion, but did not comment.

"We thank you for your guidance," Prince Amadis said calmly. "Yet I fear we have strayed from the purpose of this council. Princess Malanza was expressing worries, I believe?"

Rozala nodded.

"It's clear that the Black Queen is expecting to give battle on the outskirts of the Barony of Hedges," she said. "But I've been getting reports of her splitting up her host, and that honestly baffles me. We outnumber her by more than two to one. She should be the one attempting defeat in detail, not the one offering me that opportunity on a silver platter."

"She is barely more than a child," Prince Arnaud shrugged. "Blunders are to be expected."

And there went the only Alamans royalty in the tent, breaking his silence to offer idiocy.

"She's a girl that never lost a battle," Prince Amadis warned. "In matters of statecraft poor judgement is to be expected, but she is not unskilled at war."

"She could have gotten arrogant," Rozala admitted. "It's not uncommon in undefeated commanders, and that she was confident enough to offer limiting rules of engagement when so heavily outnumbered is telling. But I imagine the Exiled Prince and the Summer Court told themselves much the same right before she ripped out their guts."

"Though her nature is undeniably warped," the Grey Pilgrim said, "she struck me as remarkably clear-sighted in some regards. Not a woman prone to blind mistakes."

"There's a whole city of dead Callowans that begs to disagree," the Saint drawled.

"It is not only the children of the Heavens that can learn from their mistakes," the Pilgrim chided her. "She will be wary of being burned in that manner again."

"Perhaps she intends to gather her forces through the fairy gates," Princess Adeline suggested.

"We know there's a delay for journeying through Arcadia," Rozala replied, shaking her head. "And she can only take one host at a time. There are three columns marching towards us. Even if she timed it perfectly, she'd still have a third of her army in the wrong place when the battle begins. Which, to put it bluntly, she cannot afford if she wants even a shadow of a chance of winning."

"We know the Wild Hunt is sworn to her," Prince Arnaud said. "Perhaps she *can* make multiple gates."

"I can't dismiss that possibility out of hand," the Princess of Aequitan agreed. "But that still begs the question of *why* she'd split her forces in the first place. She has to know we'll be expecting gates to appear at our flanks and back when we engage. There would be no element of surprise, and that is half the advantage to be had with them. And if our foot moves quickly enough towards the gates, we could even keep her penned inside Arcadia. It is risking disaster for no gain I can discern."

"That is worrying," the Grey Pilgrim admitted. "I must see to the children, Your Graces, but I will seek guidance from Above on the matter. Perhaps a meaning to this can be divined."

Rozala hid her surprise. She'd been under the impression that future-telling was rare even among heroes, and often too vague to be of any practical use. The Augur was rumoured to be speaking in tongues half the time, and that Hasenbach was constantly struggling to turn her attention to threats instead of weather patterns. If the Grey Pilgrim could truly discern the workings of Fate, however, this was major advantage. It was irritating that such a thing would only now be revealed, but then Rozala was hardly in a position to chide the man for it.

"We will look forward to hearing your wisdom, Chosen," the Princess of Aequitan said.

The man rose, and bowed deep. He cast a look at the Saint, who smiled but shook her head. Rozala schooled her face into calm. She had an inkling that what would follow would not be pleasant. Silence followed in the wake of the departing Pilgrim, until the Saint of Swords sighed.

"He's a good man, you know," Laurence de Montfort said. "Likes to see the best in people."

"A-" Prince Arnaud began, but he was interrupted.

The Saint raked her fingers across the table, leaving deep gouges in the wood that no mortal fingers could have made. The sound was deafening, an ugly grind of steel.

"Shut the fuck up, you insignificant toady," the Saint said. "Now, Tariq chooses to believe in your moral fibre but I *know* better. I know the wickedness that you crave, that sweet whisper of earthly power. There are some among you, even now, that believe holy war can be made tool of ambition."

The old woman smiled at them, cold and terrible and utterly indifferent to their survival.

"You will not disappoint this nice old man," she said. "You will keep to the terms, and not seek to work around them. And if you seek otherwise?"

The Saint barked out a harsh laugh.

"You might be under the delusion that the consequences of ripping you animals to pieces would give me pause," she mused. "Discard that notion, princelings. The only people I answer to are up Above, and they exactly what you are made of."

Laurence de Montfort rose to her feet, shrugging.

"Think of me as the angel on your shoulders," she suggested. "You know, the one that says 'be Good, my children, or I will *fucking dine on your entrails like an orc*."

The Saint of Swords smiled at them, wagging a finger.

"I think we have an understanding, don't we?"

No one nodded.

No one needed to.

Chapter 9

Grand Pas

> "Casualties are a consequence of properly employed tactics, not the intent. To merely bludgeon away is to reduce the conduct of war to arithmetic."
>
> Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

Hakram had once told me about an old orc proverb: *even a child can devour a bear, one mouthful at a time.* Apart from reminding me that most orc sayings tended to involved blood or death in some way – and that orcs apparently weren't afraid to eat things with even larger teeth than they, to absolutely no one's surprise – it'd struck something of a chord at the time. As a rule, I'd tended to be the underdog in fights since becoming the Squire and never had that been truer than when my waltz with the Tenth Crusade began. Fifty thousand Proceran soldiers had come through the pass, and though Juniper had been dismissive about the quality of most that host she'd cautioned that numbers had a weight of their own. Even if we traded soldiers at a rate of one to three, halfway through that battle my army would collapse as an effective fighting force while the Procerans just got started with deploying their reserves. From a strict military perspective, we couldn't afford the casualties that thoroughly shattering the crusader army would cost us. From a political perspective, if took the gloves off I'd effectively kill any chance of Callow retaining its independence in the long term.

We had to beat Princess Malanza without beating her too badly, without losing too many men or resorting to any of our uglier tricks.

The Hellhound had complained of having her hands tied often and loudly, if in private, but under all that barking there'd been a visible thread of pleasure. She might have hated that politics played any part in this campaign, but I suspected she enjoyed the challenge of having restricted tools. It was forcing her to think beyond her traditional methods, to put the steel trap of a mind under all the glaring at work. We'd begun planning our battle before we ever entered Arcadia, refining it with every fresh report from the Jacks and the

Observatory. The Unconquered had famously said that grand designs in war were a thing of vanity, but to us they were even more than that: with the number of heroes the other side was fielding, any plan too complicated was essentially guaranteed to fail. As long as there was even one critical component that *had* to succeed, that specific time and place would be crawling with angry, literally Heavens-sent foreigners out to fuck up our day. We couldn't reiterate the old traps we'd used in Three Hills and Marchford: no matter how clever the bait, if we closed the teeth we'd find that steel gauntlet beat fangs.

So we hadn't made a plan, not exactly.

It could be argued to be a dozen of them, instead, or even just a general operational doctrine. If having a pivot meant we lost, then we had to either avoid pivots entirely or make them impossible to reach. And we had the means for that, for all our other flaws. That was our real trump card, when it came down to it: the fairy gates. Or more specifically, the mobility they lent my troops. I doubted they understood everything I could do with those, or even that I wasn't the only one who could make them: the Wild Hunt could open its own, if it was led by Larat. So far I'd used Arcadia to cut down time on long journeys, but that was only the surface use. Closer to the enemy I could still use them to disappear an army into thin air and reappear close by quicker than was physically possible. Just because I'd not used the gates for short journeys didn't mean I *couldn't*. The first step had been splitting the Army of Callow into three columns. Two of six thousand, and one of nine and chance – the largest one was the central one as well, and fielded all of Baroness Ainsley's reinforcements. The two armies on the wings had split from the central host, moving east and west.

We'd set out the silver, now were were going to eat the bear one bite at a time.

The crusading army was large. It had nearly twelve thousand horse to my own mere five thousand. It had priests and wizards and heroes. It was also *slow*. We'd only realized how slow it really was when it crossed the northern passage, and carefully confirmed it over the weeks since. Of that fifty thousand men, more than a third was levies. Men and women in the prime of their life, certainly, and in good shape. But farming and marching were different kinds of labour, especially when weighed down by arms and armour. The Hellhound had described our conflict as two hounds with a chain around their neck, sallying out to fight in the place where both our chains allowed us to reach. The anchor on our side was Hedges. We couldn't allow them to take the city, since it opened them a direct path into the heartlands of Callow. The anchor on theirs was their supply line. Snaking across the Whitecaps, the wagon caravans moved day and night to bring enough food across that the crusaders wouldn't run out of foodstuffs before they reached a place where they could take local supplies – either by sacking granaries or foraging the countryside. But the passage was narrow, and they had fifty thousand bellies to feed. The foodstuffs from Procer were slowing the rate they were burning through their reserves at, but it wasn't

stopping it.

If our strengths were insufficient to carry the day, Juniper had said, then we had to play to the enemy's weaknesses. And the two that were exploitable were the sluggish pace and sprawling supply lines. Now, Malanza had already proved she was no fool. She had to know it would be child's play for me to take the Order of Broken Bells out and hit the pass up north while she was still too far to prevent me from putting everything to the torch and leave a small garrison behind to make sure the river stayed dammed. We believed she'd gambled on her having enough supplies to reach Hedges even if we did, which meant she'd be picking up the pace soon to force a battle there. Taking a swing at our anchor to force us to be where she needed us to be, essentially. Except instead of facing the single host manning walls she must have expected to see arrayed before her, she now had three field armies to contend with. And those armies were moving closer to hers, making a loose half-circle so she'd be blundering into encirclement if she didn't break us apart.

"And now we find out what kind of a commander Malanza is," Juniper said.

The two of us had remained with the central army, the beating heart of the net we'd cast over the region. The crusader army was too far in the distance for us to see even the fire smoke. Seven days away, by our estimate. We'd been prudent in case she had the means to make them pick up the pace. Scrying had allowed the western and eastern army to keep the same distance on the sides.

"The Jacks finally confirmed the Watch linked up with them two days ago," I said. "Kegan is keeping her part of the bargain."

"They won't be trusted," the orc grunted. "Not if what you told me about the Grey Pilgrim is true."

"They don't need to be trusted," I reminded her. "They just need to be there."

I'd sent instruction down to Hakram to kick up a fuss at the border with Daoine to add some weight to the gambit, but my hopes were not high. Procer, unlike the Empire and I, did not have the benefit of having mages capable of scrying within Callow. Which meant information travelled back to Malanza and to the First Prince with a considerable delay compared to us. They might not even learn about Adjutant's agitation in time for it to matter, but the possibility still existed and that was enough to warrant the attempt at disinformation.

"So, what's your guess?" I asked after a moment of silence.

"She either splits her forces to engage us separately or she goes straight for the head of the snake," Juniper said. "There's risks to splitting. She's not sure how quick we can redeploy and our foot's usually better than hers. Smaller armies make that count more."

"So you think she's headed for us," I said.

"It's what I'd do, if I were her," the Hellhound said. "Otherwise she's engaging on terms we dictated. She swings at us, though, and she can assume we'll pull down our other two armies to reinforce us. She still gets the battle she needs."

"We can't give her open field all the way down to Harrow," I conceded.

"The woman has been having too leisurely a march so far, Foundling," Juniper sharply grinned. "Time to kick the hive. First blow tonight."

I nodded slowly.

"East or west?" I asked.

"Sending your vicious little minion to the east first loses us at least four days," she grunted. "West, has to be. I don't want to give her a breather or too much time to think."

"I'll talk to Larat," I said. "The Hunt's been raring to get off the leash."

"Lots of that going around," Juniper said, a tad drily.

I frowned at her.

"You're going somewhere with this, I take it?" I said.

Juniper spat to the side.

"Don't take this wrong, Catherine, but you've lost the taste for it," she said. "Any fool can see that."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted. "That I'm trying to stab people less? Juniper, saying *fuck it* and chewing through the opposition no matter the consequences is what got us in this mess in the first place. We're not playing with the kind of stakes where mistakes can be afforded anymore. One slip is all it takes to tumble down on our heads."

"You put on a crown so you have to play Wasteland games," the Hellhound grunted. "I don't like it, but I get it. But a year ago, Foundling, you would have been licking your chops at the thought of a battle like we're planning. You were *hungry* for it. Now you're just. . . "

"Tired," I finished quietly. "Tired and afraid."

"It's not pretty to look at, Catherine," my Marshal said. "Now's not the time for the fire to go out. The enemy's at the gate and going at them half-hearted is going to get a lot of people killed."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. If Juniper was willing to say this much, she'd been sitting on it for some time. And she wouldn't be the only one of my officers thinking it.

"When I was nine, I think, I was sent to the market by the orphanage matron to pick up our meat for the month," I told her. "When I got there, I saw the butcher getting roughed up by city guard. They wanted him to join one of the guilds, so Mazus would get his cut."

"So Imperial Governors were shit to your people," the orc shrugged. "Not exactly a revelation, Foundling."

Compassion had never been one of Juniper's strengths.

"I stood there," I told her. "I knew, bone-deep, that there wasn't a fucking thing I could do about it. So I just watched."

Juniper bared her teeth.

"You have the fangs now, Catherine," she said. "Keeping them pearly white means nothing's changed."

"I used to believe that," I admitted. "You know who broke that fight up? Legionaries. A pair of orcs. They beat the guards badly enough one had to

be carried away. I think that's when I decided, before I really knew it, that I was going to join the Legions. So one day I'd be the one handing the beatings instead of just *standing there*."

"So why the fuck are we giving Procer a pass for invading, then?" Juniper growled. "Those princes, those heroes. It's like we're worrying more about keeping them alive than our own soldiers. No one put a knife to their throat to make them cross that pass, Catherine. Banner went up in Salia and they signed on. I'm not preaching devilry at you – that sort of blow always comes back around. But we have all these nasty tricks we're just sitting on, and I can't think of a good reason why. So Procer gets pissy if we kill their boys? They're already riding on a godsdamned crusade. Burn them all, and the First Prince too. I'll say this for the Empress, at least when she screws us she doesn't expect us to *apologize* for it."

"You're still angry I shut down Bonfire," I said, and it was not a guess.

"I love it, you know," Juniper grinned unpleasantly, all teeth and malice. "Having this unholy mess up north and still having to beat the opposition with my hands tied. Ain't no one ever fought a war like that before. We will be *remembered*. But you know how we got all these fancy titles? 'cause we were willing to go as far as we needed to. We brawled in the mud to get up here, Catherine, and suddenly we're too good for it? We're going soft. And soft ends up in the cooking pot, sooner or later."

"That's the thing, Juniper," I said quietly. "This is the strongest I've ever been. I have armies, wealth, a kingdom. I have the Woe, sharpened fighting heroes. I have the Wild Hunt and the last good claim on Winter. Even in wildest dreams as a kid I never thought I'd get this much power."

I bit my lip.

"I thought that was *enough*," I told the orc. "Having the biggest stick. That once you had that, everything else fell into place. But while I was using that stick to whack the opposition, running all around Callow, an entire city went dark."

Juniper opened her mouth, but I gestured for her to let me keep speaking.

"No," I said. "Really think about it. *An entire city*. More than a hundred thousand people, Hellhound. Because we were good and we were strong and we got cocky. There is an entire part of a kingdom gone forever because I thought being feared and powerful would see us through. It didn't. It won't now, either."

"You can't let Liesse fil your shadow, Catherine," Juniper said, almost kindly. "Wasteland get always fucks the world. It's the only trick they have."

"I have to, Juniper," I said. "I've walked out ruins still breathing again and again, so I stopped thinking we could lose. But we did lose, last year. We killed and got killed, and all we had to show for it at the end was a mass grave."

"We killed Diabolist," the orc said. "We shut the door on the Fae."

"We beat them," I said. "That's not a victory. We just stopped them from making the larger mess they had it in them to make."

"Then you learned the wrong lesson," Juniper said. "And we should have pulled the trigger on Bonfire the moment the army was halfway ready. We're still fighting their kind of war, Catherine."

"No," I said, and ice crept into the tone. "They think that, no doubt. Some of your officers might think that too. But make no mistake, this is *my* play from opening to curtains. I'll negotiate with the other side, because it gets me better results than crushing them outright. Because peace is a better path to what I want than setting cities aflame. But I still have it, Hellhound. The urge to just *step on them*. The victory I'm after simply happens to require more than corpses."

The Marshal of Callow studied me for a long time, before giving a sharp nod.

"So long as it's not squeamishness," she finally said.

I looked up at the afternoon sky, the spring sun that failed to warm me.

"You're right, about the fear," I said. "I am afraid. That was the hardest learning, that power doesn't solve anything, it just... broadens the scope. Raises the stakes. I got on top of the pedestal, and now that I've had a good look around what I'm seeing is making me want to flinch."

I was not blind to the gathering storm. The Empress was feeling cornered, and she'd already proven the kind of measures she was willing to take if she thought survival was at stake. Black had holed up in the Vales for winter, cut from his old anchors, and in a way that made him more dangerous than he'd used to be. When he came out swinging, and he would, there was no telling who he'd be swinging at. The Free Cities were a pot about to boil over, led by two madmen whose intent was anyone's guess. And the whole muster of the West was gathering, preparing to hit Callow in waves. And in the middle of it all, I had to break the ugly story that had ground both Callow and Praes under the wheel for millennia.

"Fear's good," Juniper said. "Fear is blood and life. But it's too late to flinch, Warlord."

"I know," I murmured. "And so we got to war again."

We parted ways after that, and began our work. The thing was, what we were doing wasn't rewriting the book. The tactics at work were old ones, used by armies for centuries. On the other hand, none of those armies had had fairy gates to work with. All it took was asking Hierophant to scry our western commander – the freshly-promoted General Nauk, as it happened. And so after nightfall, the six thousand men of the western army disappeared from the field. They reappeared three days of march behind the crusading host, and the wolf riders that had once been General Istrid's began to raid their way up the Proceran supply line. They took cattle and grain, poultry and bread, but left the men who surrendered untouched. Didn't even take them prisoner. Juniper's notion, that, not sentimentality. Leaving them behind mean more mouths for Malanza to feed. The Princess of Aequitan sent twelve thousand men north to bring Nauk to battle, mostly horse and fantassins, but by the time they arrived

the army was long gone. It reappeared to the west a few days later. *That's right, Malanza. Now you know for sure I have two gate-makers. So let's find out if your heroes can discern where they are, shall we?* The hive had been duly kicked.

Now we got to see what came screaming out.

Chapter 10

Allegro

> "There are no reserves, you fool, only second waves!"
>
> Isabella the Mad, only general to have ever defeated Theodosius the Unconquered on the field

"They're about to split, Boss," Robber said.

He was standing too close to the scrying bowl, which made his face look a lot larger than it should be and was just kind of distressing to see in general. Thief cleared her throat.

"We need numbers and direction," she said.

There was the sound of struggle, a yelp and then Robber was pushed aside. Indrani grinned at us through the bowl and I sighed before she even began speaking.

"This camp is just crawling with heroes, Cat," Archer said. "Dunno if you were aware, but they've got at least one mageling. Zeze's going to have competition."

"And how would you know that," I slowly said. "You were under orders to stay out of sight."

"I got eagle eyes," she proudly said.

From behind her I heard Robber snort.

"It's true, Boss," he said. "I saw the eagle she took them from. Wasn't pretty."

Indrani pouted.

"You ruined it, Blaster," she complained. "I was going to work up to the reveal after she got snippy."

I was too wary to be amused by the thought of Archer attacking the local wildlife, sadly.

"Tell me you stayed out of sight," I said.

The other Named rolled her eyes.

"I was good," she said. "Used an aspect at a distance, they never saw me."

"We don't know if they have anyone able to detect that," I told her harshly. "Now there's a chance they know you're out there."

"They're not Praesi," Vivienne said mildly. "I won't call this anything but reckless, but unless they were on the lookout for her already the chances she triggered a ward are negligible."

I ignored her.

"Quiet, Archer," I said. "*Quiet* is what I asked you for."

"It's what you got," she dismissed. "That was over a day ago, if they thought someone was out there they would have sent heroes after us by now."

"Let's hope for that," I grunted. "But we're now assuming you, at least, were made."

"It's just twelve heroes," Archer shrugged. "Nothing to worry about. Worse comes to worse, I shoot a few in the eye and run away."

Strange, it hadn't occurred to me before now that the muster of heroes on the other side was essentially a tenth and two officers. I *had* been tired, and there'd been a few days a while back where I'd had vicious headaches. Must have been the lack of sleep having unforeseen consequences. We were all feeling the pressure: even Vivienne and Masego had been out of sorts.

"Don't engage, just run," I told her. "And get Robber back in here, unless you can tell me about their troop movements."

"She can't," the goblin piped up from a distance. "She was roaring drunk at the time."

"Barely tipsy," Archer blatantly lied. "But this is beneath me, so Jasper can handle it."

She moved aside, and an irritated-looking Robber filled the bowl again.

"Best we can tell, Malanza's splitting her army half and half," he told us. "Same for the heroes, though that's harder to be sure. They've got their own little camp aside from the army."

I grimaced. Juniper had told me that if the crusaders separated their army they were unlikely to send a host after each of my own. It'd whittle down their numbers by too much, enough that if we went to reinforce a single army we'd have them outnumbered at that particular battle. Evidently Princess Malanza intended to have numerical superiority wherever she engaged regardless of reinforcements.

"And where are they headed?" Thief asked.

"This is guesswork," Robber warned. "But by the way they're shifting their supplies, I'd say centre and west. There's a few days left before they'll be ready to move."

Vivienne let out a breath and my face darkened. So they *could* tell where our gate-makers were. I'd sent Larat and the Hunt to General Hune in the east, after Nauk had struck the supply lines from the west, in an attempt to keep the shell game going. It was possible the Proceran princess had gotten lucky with a guess – her odds weren't bad, half and half since it was a given the centre had to stay mobile – but she did not strike me as the type leaving

things to luck. Which meant there was a hero who could sniff out our gates, or at least the assets who made them.

"All right, good work," I said. "Anything else to report?"

"They're keeping a close eye on the Watch," the Special Tribune said. "There's a hero on them at all times, and the two old timers visited a while back. Not sure what happened, but no fighting aftewards. They didn't relax the surveillance either, though."

My lips quirked. We'd known going in that the odds of a truth-teller being along with the crusade were high, and we'd planned accordingly. None of the Watch were aware of what side they were actually on, and I'd made sure Kegan planted false rumours in her commanders that the heroes could chew over. The secret order was known only to one of her mages, and even the specifics of it were nothing too suspicious on the surface: all the mage had to do was check for a signal in the sky at a specific hour, and scry after seeing it. That, and note the position of officer tents. It would be quite enough.

"No need to worry about that," I told Robber. "Keep your people ready, Special Tribune. We'll have work for you soon enough."

"Looking forward to it," the goblin said, baring needle-like teeth.

The spell died, and after a last glimmer of sorcery the scrying bowl was filled with mere water again. Vivienne drummed the table lightly, though given the sensitivity of my hearing she might as well have been pounding away.

"I know," I said. "We need to make a decision about Headsman."

Thief smiled mirthlessly.

"I know you worry about the fallout, and not just because enemy officers will be put to the sword," she noted. "We'd be revealing another trick the crusaders don't know about."

"But," I said.

"The means it would be carried out might be different, but Procer is not unfamiliar with the use of assassination to influence warfare," Vivienne said. "Catherine, they murder each other over grazing rights disputes – and I'm not exaggerating there, the sister of the Prince of Orne was poisoned over that not even eight years ago. We *are* fighting off an invasion."

"You know what we need to achieve," I reminded her.

"Hasenbach at the table, without blots on our war record that would make her people unseat her if she negotiated with us," she agreed. "But considering the woman sent all her opposition into the mind grinder that is you, I doubt she'll balk at treating with us after 'mere' peasant officers are killed."

The last part she spoke with distaste, as much for the phrasing as the people it applied to – not the officers, no, but the handful of nobles who considered them so very expendable. Not that I could talk, I'd admit. Headsman had been designed as an operation that would shake the crusader army without getting half the High Assembly howling for our blood. I was, in my own way, considering them just as expendable. The thought tasted bitter, but I did not deny it. Lying to myself had become a lot more dangerous since I'd let Winter in.

"If we pull the trigger on it, we have to act now," I admitted.

"There is a chance their host will later reunite," Thief said.

"If we fuck up," I bluntly replied. "We want them split, it makes them manageable. The only way we have all their major officers together again is if we blunder. Besides you've already told me the longer we wait the higher the chances this fails."

"It's a judgement call," Vivienne said. "I don't envy you the decision, but it is yours to make."

I watched her as she brushed back her hair. It'd gotten longer, though still quite a ways were left to go until it reached the length of mine. Her blue-grey eyes were untroubled, which I envied more than a little. Every day seemed to add another few pounds to what was already balancing on my shoulders. I chewed over what she'd said, but not the decision she'd brought to the fore. More the fact that she'd laid it at my feet, instead. When we'd begun, Vivienne had made it clear she was only sticking around so long as she thought I was the best game in town for Callow. And now here we were, planning how to turn back an invasion together.

"You seem amused," she said.

"Just thinking about how far we've come," I honestly said. "Can you imagine us having this conversation two years ago?"

She laughed, a little bitterly.

"It was a simpler world I lived in, two years ago," Vivienne Dartwick admitted. "The lines in the sand were visible."

"And now?" I asked quietly.

"Now I wonder," Thief said, and her lips set in a hard line. "In your service, I have been part of ugly things. No two ways about that. But nowadays I look at the rest of Calernia, and all I see is vultures. You are flawed, I know that even if you've grown on me. But you're also the only one who seems to care about any of this. There are twelve heroes on Calernian soil, Catherine, and every single one of them is a pawn to Proceran ambition. It is the reason they came in the first place. I thought... I thought *better*. Of all of us."

"They're not responsible for the Conquest," I murmured. "For Malicia's cold-blooded ruthlessness, or what came of Black playing his game with the Heavens. They get no pass from me for their own actions, but I will not blame them for that."

"I've studied them, Catherine," Thief said. "And the histories as well. When Callow as being invaded, Ashur was fighting for supremacy of the Samite Gulf. The princes of Procer were so far gone they preferred fighting civil war to taking up arms against Praes ascendant. Half the Dominion was fighting border skirmishes over trade rights, without a care of what happened beyond their borders. And the heroes... well, they had their own struggles, the ones that were already born. Yet none so great they should not have been set aside to fight against the fucking theft of an entire kingdom. It is infuriating, that it took them twenty years to suddenly find their *principles*. Can they really be

called that, if they only surface when convenient? It reeks of pretext instead, and my tolerance for those has grown thin."

Your people grown warped by your presence, the Grey Pilgrim had said. *Old traits grown more vicious and acute.* I could not tell if Vivienne had come to speak those words because she had seen the face of the enemy and felt only disgust, or because of something more insidious. A spreading influence I was unaware of. I had asked nothing of the Gods Below, since taking my Name, but I would have been a fool to believe they gained nothing from empowering me. *Does it not matter in the slightest what I do?* I wondered. I'd always dismissed the talk of heroes as mere religious prattle, the kind of empty sermons the House of Light garnished its true power with. But if there was truth to it, if I was a blight on Creation just by standing on the side of Below however loosely… That was the thing, wasn't it? I was expected to take on faith the words of people trying to kill me. Or to follow the sayings of sacred texts that had been used as tools of ambition as often as not. There were no easy truths to find. All I had was what I knew, and it was always too little.

"I do not mean this as excuse of the Empire," Vivienne softly said. "I have learned of the people within it, that they are not as wretched as I once believed. But the High Lords and the Tower, that entire edifice of bloody misery? It must be brought down. There is not other choice, because we cannot tame a dog gone rabid. But I will not mistake the horrors of one side for the virtues of the other."

"It was easier, wasn't it?" I said whimsically. "When we thought right and wrong had a colour code?"

Thief put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, a rare gesture of affection.

"I will not thank you, for opening my eyes to that," she said, withdrawing her hand. "But I understand now, why you are who you are. Why anyone would look at the sky and curse. There is a point where it is no longer about right and wrong, isn't there? Where it's about doing something, *anything*, to avoid falling in that same old pit."

Her fingers clenched, her eyes hardened.

"They don't get to walk over us, to kill us, just because some fucking angel handed down a mandate," she hissed. "They don't get to avoid the responsibility of that choice. Or the consequences."

Villain, I thought. There was only one side that spoke this way, and didn't pray to Above.

"Black told me, once, that Fate it the coward's way out," I murmured. "The abdication of personal responsibility. I hate him a little bit, for still being right after all these years."

She snorted.

"We might still lose, you know," Thief said. "That's the part that gets me. No matter how prepared we are, it might not be enough."

"Could be," I agreed. "But then we do the same thing villains have always done, when their plans fall apart."

"And what's that?"

"You get up," I said. "You spit out the blood in your mouth, and you try again."

We stayed sitting there for a long time, the two of us in front of a bowl gone fallow.

"We proceed with Headsman," I finally said, breaking the silence. "Tell Masego to prepare. And send word to Kegan. The Deoraithe are to cross the river."

"I will," Thief replied. "And me?"

"I'll open the gate as soon as Hierophant does the numbers," I said. "This is going to be... delicate."

"Isn't it always?" Vivienne smiled.

—

It'd been some time since I had worn my full regalia – if it could be called that.

Full plate from head to toe, with chain shirt and aketon beneath. I'd considered this heavy, once, enough that it restricted my mobility. Nowadays I barely noticed it. I wore the helmet Hakram had gifted me, the hinged thing of steel with the black iron crown set atop it. My shield lay hanging on Zombie the Third's flank as it idly picked at grass it could not actually digest, but my longsword was clasped tight to my flank on the sword-belt. The satchel at my side held munitions, though not standard issue. Robber had tinkered away before his departure. The Mantle of Woe streamed down my back, its bright colours muted in the shade of a moonless night. There was a weight to wearing all of this, and not only a physical one. Black Queen, they called me, but it was not a Name. It might have been, before my teacher broke Liesse and himself with it, but the story had died and the path with it. It would have been a lie, though, to still call myself the Squire. No one did anymore. I could still feel the bare bones of that Name, some days, but the flesh and muscle over them was Winter's. Whatever I'd done in Liesse, when I had broken Masego's scaffolding, it had ended my tenure. I had no aspects anymore, only the power that my mantle lent me. Even what I'd ripped from Akua, what had once been Call, it was... different now. By taking it I had come to own it, and that opened doors I'd never even dreamed of.

I rolled a dark wooden whistle between my steel-clad fingers, feeling it pulse with had once been the Diabolist's power. To be fae, and I had touched the face of that, was to cease seeing the difference between principle and object as more than thin boundary. I'd experimented with that power, under Hierophant's supervision, and the whistle had been one of the greater successes. It was an aspect made matter. Certain limitations had not been escaped, and some had even increased – anyone could use the whistle, yes, but Take had been theft of a finite bundle of power. The whistle could only be used once, since I'd yet to figure out how to partition uses. It would, however, work with the full strength of that aspect.

"A worthy trinket, for the Queen of the Hunt," Larat said.

I glanced at him. Of all the fae sworn to me, he was the only one willing to bring his mount close to mine. In the early days after receiving their oaths, I'd had to... establish a pecking order. Some of them had been under the impression that entering my service was only a means to enter Creation unrestricted, and that now they'd entered they could play as they wished. My eyes turned to the dark-haired woman at the back of the pack, who shivered when she noticed me watching her. She'd been of Summer, before. It had not stopped her from trying to make sport of a full tavern of people in Laure, weaving glamour into their minds so they could play out a tragedy for her where real blood was spilled. Thief had been tracking all of them, so I'd intervened before any damage was done. I'd taken power to call her to heel, though, and drawing that deep had coloured my reaction. There were only two fingers to her left hand, now. I'd made her *eat* the rest.

No one had tested me since, at least.

"Won't see use tonight," I said, and flicked my wrist.

The whistle disappeared into nothingness, returning to Winter.

"Such leashes you inflict upon your might," the former Prince of Nightfall sighed. "You could take so much more. And you have yet to bestow."

I grimaced.

"I'm not going to hand out mantles to anyone, Larat," I said. "Much less you."

He laughed, cold and crisp.

"I have no more need of titles, save that which is owed," he said. "But you are Queen of Winter, Catherine Foundling. No queen can be forever without a court."

"You must take me for a complete idiot," I mused. "Bad enough I have it whispering in the back of my mind, I'm not going to *spread* that influence."

"Ah, but there are such benefits to bestowal," Larat smiled. "Freedom from the chains of entropy among them. How many of those you love are you willing to lose to age, before bending your neck?"

My fingers clenched. Was he implying that if I titled Robber or any other of the goblins... No, I could not begin down that road. Bad enough I'd had speculations about what the Council of Matrons might be considering back in the Wasteland, if I ended up granting a sliver of Winter to Robber there would be *blood*.

"I am no stranger to sacrifice," I replied shortly.

"So you say," the Huntsman languidly shrugged. "We have all the time in the world to find out, don't we?"

I eyed him darkly.

"Even for a treacherous lieutenant, you're a little much," I told him.

He scoffed.

"Am I a mortal, to deny my own nature?" he replied. "I am Fae, my queen: be it fair or foul, I will never be less than I am. I will be monster and schemer,

hound and prince, but not once *untrue* through any of it. Deception lies in the eye of the other, not in one's own blood."

"That was very inspiring," I drawled. "Doesn't make me want to stab you just to be on the safe side any less, but lovely little speech. Really. If I still had functioning tear ducts I might shed a tear."

"Tears will be shed when you feel them," Larat told me. "Your mistake is in trying to quantify, to place rules where there is only will."

That, more than his tirade, had me shivering. Because it rang true. *Place rules where there is only will.* I looked away. Masego had continued to study my body, and the more I learned the more unsettled I became. He'd told me since the beginning that my flesh and blood was a construct, now, that there was nothing natural about it. To learn that I no longer sweated had been no horrifying revelation, but that while I might breathe out of habit I no longer *needed* to? There was a reason my liquor cabinet was well-stocked.

"You're sure we're close enough?" I asked.

Larat sighed.

"Your meddling practitioner tries to regulate that which is beyond regulation," he said. "My queen, there is only the story. All else is beneath your notice."

Yeah, that was less than reassuring. I felt the power bloom in the distance, and turned Zombie around so I could have a better look. Red lights in the night sky, to tall and bright they must have been visible even down in Laure.

"Ready yourselves," I called out the Hunt. "You know the rules."

There was sparse laughter, but many eager grins. I did not have to wait long before it came. I'd expected it to be different, even though I'd not really known what to expect. Like a gate, maybe, or a spell. All I felt was a window, just at the corner of my vision.

"The Wild Hunt rides tonight," the fae who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall laughed. "Raise your banners, damned souls. Sound the horns and loose the hounds. *Let us make sport under moonless night*."

I stepped through, bridging thought and act without embracing either. The water-filled bowl shattered as we crossed through it, a reflection made truth. Wind whipped at the inside of the tent as Zombie neighed, the terrified Deoraithe mage at my feet turning white. Every Callowan knew that scrying near the Waning Woods was like sending an invitation to the Wild Hunt.

We had accepted it.

Chapter 11

Ballon

> "You might say that they'll never see me coming."
>
> Dread Empress Malevolent II, announcing the raising of her invisible army

"*Your Majesty*?" the Deoraithe mage stuttered out.

I leaned down and gently touched his forehead with an armoured finger.

"Don't resist," I said. "It'll be uncomfortable, but not painful."

Unless he tried to fight me, but in this case the fear that trailed me as much as my cape saw to the matter. The man went rigid as a board. I breathed out mist and Winter crept through my veins. His soul wriggled under the tight grip of my will, as I rifled through vague memories. He had, I thought, a well-organized mind. Shame about the panic tinging it. I found what I needed anyway, the locations of the officer tent's he'd found as he'd been told.

"You were thorough," I said, withdrawing my finger. "Well done."

The fifty riders of the Hunt were too many for so small a tent, and one of the fae casually blew it away with a flick of the wrist before it could tangle the banners. Midnight was no bar to my sight, and what I saw around us was the Watch responding to our sudden arrival with flawless professionalism. Ah, the things I could do with an army's worth of these. It was almost tempting to hollow out Kegan's soul, tie puppet strings to the remnants and take them all for my own. I bit my lip until it bled, the flare of pain helping me focus. I reached for my saddlebag, taking out the seal of House Iarsmai I'd asked Kegan to send me months ago. I tossed it into the mage's hands.

"Validate this," I ordered.

The man shivered, though I was unsure why. I'd been very polite so far. Murmuring in the mage tongue he traced the tall dead oak on the seal with his fingers, gasping when it glimmered green.

"It's real," he said.

Unsheathing my sword, I flicked the blade behind me after gauging the surroundings. Creation folded unto itself, the fairy gate opening thirty feet

wide and just as tall. I tied off the threads, giving it a finite lifespan. One of the newer Winter tricks in my arsenal.

"By the authority granted to me by Duchess Kegan Iarsmai, I order the Watch to immediately withdraw," I called out. "And quick about it, I don't have the time to hold your hand. You have half an hour before the gate closes."

Zombie was chomping at the bit, which admittedly was better than chomping at grass I'd probably need to have a goblin dig out of her later. I took a moment to calm myself, then dug into the memories I'd glimpsed. Reorienting myself was the hardest part of figuring it all out, since none of the unconscious markers the mage had used were markers I was familiar with. Masego and I had figured out a way around that through the Observatory with the card I'd been keeping up my – heavily armoured – sleeve, but I was without the benefit of Hierophant tonight. My mind struggled with the discrepancies, until I let through another sliver of Winter and there was a sensation like a spike through my forehead. No pain, though, only terrifyingly clear understanding.

"Riders of the Hunt," I called out.

All fifty of them turned to me as one with unnatural smoothness.

"Follow," I laughed. "Tonight we ride."

"*Finally*," Larat hissed, blade in hand. "Sound the horns. Let them hear us coming."

Banners were raised, not of silk or cloth but crow's feathers and shadow. Shining coldly like a raven's eye. A fae with hair like spun gold touched the horn to her lips, and doom screamed across the night. I spurred on Zombie, and felt her devour the distance easily as I guided us by memories not my own. The Watch parted for us, already preparing to retreat, and we fell unto the unprepared camp of the crusaders like hungry wolves. Men shouted out in Chantant, known to me regardless of sight. The heat of them could be felt on the tip of my tongue, the fear that set their hearts aflutter thundering in my ears. It pleased me. It was slaughter, wherever we rode. Men half-dressed and half-awake were torn apart by sword and spear and darker things: hounds of air and darkness, called forth by the horns. I wielded the monster like a knife as my thoughts cooled. The Alamans army closest to us had kept the tents of their officers together and I made them pay for that mistake. Before the hounds even reached them the soldiers I raised my hand and choked them with rings of ice and shade, a dozen dead in a heartbeat. Smiling, I leaned forward.

"Up," I ordered. "*Kill*."

Corpses with broken necks and ugly marks around their throats rose up as the Hunt passed through. Screams followed in our wake. We would begin, I decided, with the outer ring. Princess Malanza's own host was closer to the centre, but I would let her people feel it coming. Know what was prowling the night for them. We carved our way out of the Alamans army camp, scything through the company of fantassins that tried to form up in our way. Men and women were trampled by horses, terror blooming again in the wake of death as the corpses rose and chaos spread.

"You will go no further," a man's voice announced calmly.

I cocked my head to the side. No fear in this one. And such *power*. Young but scarred, his voice had echoed of faraway Levant. A large man with a war hammer hoisted over his shoulder, burdened with heavy plate. I neither slowed nor ceased, Zombie galloping straight at him. The hero hefted his war hammer and struck with impossible swiftness, aiming to shatter the legs of my mount. With a cold laugh I guided my horse and her wings unfolded, leaping tall above the man as the Hunt streamed around him seamlessly. We rode even as the man screamed of our cowardice, ever onwards. I had not come here to be waylaid by petty sidekicks. The camps had come alive and our prey was moving. It became slower work, picking off officers who'd joined their companies. Frustratingly slow. The riders slaked their blood on those that could be found instead. No surrender was offered and no mercy granted.

Then the sky came down on our heads.

Instinct allowed me to guide Zombie away from the worst of it, but wet earth sprayed over us as a massive gouge split the ground open. Even as it began to rain mud, a woman walked out of the mess. Old, I thought. Neither tall nor short, and she wore no armour aside from a cuirass over long cloth robes. In her hand was a simple sword of oiled steel, and she was rolling her wrists to limber them.

"Saint of Swords," I said, voice echoing with the howl of blizzards.

"Black Queen," the old woman said, light tapping the flat of the blade against her shoulder. "Nice of you to visit."

My will spread, weaving glamour across the sky according to borrowed memories.

"Go," I told the Hunt. "Fulfil my purpose."

"Stay," the Saint grinned. "Die screaming."

She swung again, and this time I grasped what was being wielded. Not an aspect or a spell. Nothing like the Lone Swordsman's power or the Gallant Brigand's. No, I'd only seen this once before: when Ranger had considered killing me seriously enough I'd felt myself die. When the Saint of Swords attacked, she did so with the sharpened intent to kill us. She had hardened her willpower so much that Creation counted no difference between her will and truth, the air howling as it cut itself apart. I drew deep and laughed, ice crashing against the blow with a gargantuan cracking sound. Shards sprayed everywhere as the Hunt obeyed, hounds and riders streaming out in every direction but that of the coming fight. I leapt off Zombie and set her aflight. Her wings made her too valuable to risk here.

"Winter, is it?" the Saint of Swords mused, strolling forward. "Never had that before. Try to make it entertaining."

"You will make," I said, "very useful artefacts."

A quiet voice in the back of my mind howled, screaming that revealing any unknown capacity to the enemy was sheer stupidity. I could not seem to care. It had felt... right to chastise her that way. We closed the distance as one,

swords bared. I feinted to the side but she slapped it away contemptuously, a half-step bringing her into my guard and without missing a beat she cut my throat. Red gushed out, but it was more Winter than blood – an exertion of will was all it took to heal the wound. I spat out the blood in my mouth, making distance between us.

"Regenerators," the Saint sighed. "You never bother to learn how to fight properly, with a crutch like that. Sloppy."

The nonchalance tasted fouler in my mouth than the blood, called for *utter destruction* in answer, but I breathed out and smoothed the edges growing ragged. I attacked again, low and quick. Parry, but when she closed in again I was ready: a spear of shadow formed out of my free hand and tore towards her. Snorting, the heroine raked her bare fingers down and tore through the darkness like wet parchment. In the heartbeat where I hesitated, she struck quick as a viper – aiming to cut off my head in full, this time. I ducked under by the barest of margins but she kicked me in the face, and as I rocked back she struck again. My parry was effortlessly turned, blade twisting around to carve through my wrist like it was butter. I pivoted, caught the hand still holding the blade with my other pne and forced it back on even as I avoided a thrust that would have gone through my eye if I'd been a moment slower. Winter flared and the pieces reattached, my fingers twitching as the power skittered through them.

"I can see it," the Saint mused. "Take the crippling to avoid the killing. There's a hint of Ranger in there, however diluted. A bastard's bastard."

I rolled my shoulders as she watched me indifferently.

"Again," I said.

"Change of plans," the old woman smiled.

The spell struck me from the side like than fist of an angry god. I felt my flesh melt off, my blood boil – until I opened the floodgates, and shot out of the fire storm as my face peeled off flake by flake. That had *stung*.

"Reinforcements, my dear lady," a man's voice drawled. "Though you seem to need them not."

My eyes flicked to the side. Three of them. Short man with a leather coat and a casting rod must have been responsible for the flame. An olive-skinned woman with two knives and a red-painted face started walking towards me, while the last was unarmed. Priest, I decided, looking at his ornate robes. Attrition was no longer feasible if they had a healer. On the other hand, now it was four on one. My odds had just gotten a lot better.

"Well," I grinned, my teeth grown sharp. "Now it's a party. Have at it, heroes."

"How uncouth," the man in leather said, wrinkling his nose.

When the fire came again, erupting in a cone from the rod, I flicked away. Two Knives closed in from the side as the Saint was forced to go around the spell. Eyes following the arms, I let the knife-wielder commit to a cut from the left before half-stepping out of the way, hand snaking up to catch the extended

wrist and *snapping* it. There was a scream, but I slapped her open mouth and filled with ice. She began choking until Light bloomed and melted it. It even streaked down to unsnap the wrist. No matter, I was already past her.

"Damnation," the spellcaster cursed, seeing me close the distance in the blink of an eye.

A sphere of what looked like liquid flame formed around him, but what was fire to me? I gathered power and struck at it, ripping off a chunk of the protective sphere to get at the terrified man beneath. Instinct warned me and I listened. Leaping above the flames, I narrowly avoided being run through by the Saint – though, twisting halfway up the arcing jump, I shaped a spike of rime and sent it howling after Two Knives. The heroine flickered, as if she'd been an illusion all this time, and what should have torn through her abdomen instead put a hole in the ground twenty feet behind her. Displacement? Useful trick. Too useful to be anything but an aspect. I landed in a crouch.

"Keep away from her, kids," the Saint ordered. "She's a few years ahead of what you can handle."

My eyes flicked to the sky. Of the five glamoured markers I had placed, three were left. I'd have to play with these a little longer, lest they pursue the Hunt. I grimaced. I'd drawn on Winter enough already that anything more was going to starkly affect my judgement instead of just reinforce bad instincts. *Until the markers are gone*, I told myself. *Then retreat*. I drew deep, and this time when the Saint struck at me I drowned the world in ice. Massive spinning blades tore through the air and ground, though I felt them shatter within a heartbeat. The hound had teeth. No matter. The creature with Two Knives had retreated to protect the thing that wielded Light, but the spellcaster was vulnerable. I wove around balls of flame effortlessly, parted a burning wall with a flick of my sword and found the human behind it staring back defiantly. It had gathered sorcery before it, a hundred hanging needles that burned the very air around them.

"Dodge *that*," the human hissed, and they flew.

Laughing, I formed a gate that swallowed them into Arcadia and closed it just as swiftly. The human was casting again, and I could feel death coming. Light, from the side, and something more dangerous from the hound. I shaped glamour with but a thought, mine own silhouette striving for the spellacasrer as I leapt up shrouded in nothingness. The illusion was broken by a beam of Light, but the hound had caught the scent: even as I landed atop a ring of shade, she cut a wound into the air and ran atop it towards me. I broke the ring and fell as the other humans finally saw through the glamour, slow things that they were. Abandoning the spellcaster, I made for the Light-bearer and its protector. The knife-wielding thing shouted out a word in some foreign tongue that tasted of spice and blood, charging me with blinding speed. Ah, the arrogance of mortals. Gracefully, I stepped around the blow and simply left my sword in her way. It carved through her shoulder, blood spraying as the arm fell to the ground. I took a modified sharper from the satchel and

shoved it into the stump, triggering the mechanism inside with a shard of ice. The detonation broke bone and tossed her away even as the Light-wielder shot another brilliant beam at me. My free hand caught it, fingers beginning to melt away, and I forced it to careen aside.

It had slowed me. The gout of flame I avoided with a mere half-step even as my fingers grew back, but the Saint struck harder. Holding the wound she had carved in the sky like a massive blade, she scythed through the side of me. I was quick enough it went through my shoulder instead of my head. In a heartbeat, arm and leg and flank were pulped. Winter hissed in fury, and they began to coalesce anew in ice.

"Not regeneration," the Saint frowned. "Creationally fixed body. Just pour power until it remakes itself. You've turned yourself into proper abomination, girl. If there's still any of you left in there."

"Irritating," I noted, voice echoing with the death of embers.

"Beat it, kids," the hound ordered. "This one's going to take a *lot* of killing before she goes down."

Already the Light-wielder was fixing the creature I had mangled. The hound was an irritant, she must be dealt with before the rest was tended to. I seized threads of glamour and sent them into her mind, but they... broke. That was no soul. It was a sword, and somehow more.

"You hold dominion," I said.

"Only over the one thing," the Saint grinned. "But that's usually enough."

My eyes flicked to the sky. Another glamoured marker had vanished. Only one left now. And when it did, I would... I frowned. It was hard to remember. The hound took advantage of my distraction, striking anew. I let instinct guide me and steel rang against steel. She batted aside my guard but the spike of frost I shot at her throat forced her to turn her follow-through blow into a parry as I returned on the offensive. Cut high, swept away, but I turned with it and lunged at her back. She caught the tip between two fingers and *twisted*, the steel shattering. Frost filled the break as I withdrew, tasting her movements in the air. The footing gave her away. Or so I had thought: what should have been a strike at my arm was a slide forward instead, and when I tried a head-butt she met me with her own. We hit halfway through, neither hurt until she raked her fingers across my chest plate and cut through still boiling-hot steel. I let Winter loose, screaming cold winds blowing the both of us back. Some part of me insisted I look at the sky. The rest wanted to carve open that insolent hound and add her entrails to my cape. One was more pleasing than the other.

"Let us test it, then," I smiled. "The mettle of our domains."

Darkness fell, and came cold with it. The world fell away. Yet under an ink-black sky stood the Saint of Swords, radiant and unruffled. Unimpressed. I inhaled the scent of it, puzzled.

"Your dominion," I said. "It is not projected. Only within."

"Took me a decade of hard killing to get that down," the hound replied. "But there's always a fight to be found in Procer, if you know where to look."

My frown deepened and the cold focused on her, but all it did was cool the blade. It had been forged of great fires, I thought. What coldness I had to offer was insufficient.

"Gods, I'm going to feel this one in the joints," the Saint grunted.

She had no sword in hand, when she took her stance. I grit my teeth and poured all of my domain into her, but slowed was not stopped. She swung, and the light was blinding. Something... not broke, but it was wounded. Damaged. As I screamed the night fled, and I found myself kneeling over grounds rent asunder by our fight. Returned to Creation. The heroine was panting. *Shit*, I thought. *What the fuck was that?* I was feeling like myself again, but I was also feeling my heart beat. Like it actually mattered, like I was *human* again. The last marker was gone, I saw. And I sure as Hells wasn't sticking around to take another of whatever in that'd been. Seizing reins gone frail, I called back the Hunt. Fewer than anticipated answered my call, but I realized with ugly surprise it was not rebellion I was dealing with. The heroes must have killed some of them. At least ten were gone, maybe more.

I legged it. No two ways about it, I made like a proper villain and fled the field. The heroine tried to follow and almost caught me around the corner behind a tent, scything straight through with another of those not-blows, but Zombie answered my call and landed just behind. We took flight even as the old woman cursed and carved another wound into the air, immediately running on it after me. Yeah, fuck that. I wasn't picking a second fight with a Named who could shrug off my full domain. I opened the gate in the sky even higher, seeing the Hunt take flight behind me, and went straight through into Arcadia. I didn't even stop there, flying Zombie far from the entrance. The Saint, thank the Gods, did not follow. I learned why when another four of the Hunt disappeared from the back of my mind.

I could not help but be thankful she'd chosen to whittle away at my trump card instead of trying to go after me. It might have been possible to trap her in here, but that smelled of the Saint cutting her way back out at the worst possible moment down the line. The Hunt gathered to me, having lost a few feathers, but Headsman had been a success. Not without losses, but I wasn't entirely opposed to the Hunt being thinned out before they inevitably stabbed me in the back. Larat was the first to address me after I landed, drenched in blood from head to toe. Someone was in a good mood.

"A victory, my queen," he said.

I looked up at the Arcadian sky and smiled. Sure, it'd been that. But more importantly, it had been a *very* good distraction. After all, the very moment I'd opened the gate for the Watch someone had come through. And while we were busy being loud and visible?

Thief had been on the prowl.

"All right, saddle up," I called out. "We need to find the Watch contingent before retreating."

We needed to hurry. The sooner we got back to camp, the sooner I could ask Hierophant why my skin was capable of bruising again.

Chapter 12

Cambré

> "In a finite world, one's gain (victory, large cave) inevitably means loss (dead female, enemy grows) for another. There can be no peace (looking away, knife already in a corpse) when the very nature of Creation is contest (not enough meat, talking)."
>
> Extract from a theorized translation of 'Remnant and Ruin', one of the few goblin texts ever obtained

"This should not be possible," Masego said, sounding obscurely pleased.

He was in a good mood, though I did not share it. The frequency at which I ended up lying on table while he fiddled with my guts and soul was quite frankly depressing. At least this time I had pants on, only my upper body bare.

"We keep this up for another year," I said, "and you'll have seen me naked more often than Kilian ever did."

The dark-skinned mage sighed, glass eyes rolling inside the sockets. Ugh. Full turn, that would never be not creepy even glimpsed only through an eye cloth.

"Your insistence I 'buy you dinner first' is absurd," Hierophant said. "The only food available here is Legion rations, which you already own. I think. My attention might have waned when we had that afternoon where you explained to us how kingdoms worked."

Ah, that'd been a Hells of an affair. The afternoon session of 'We Are In Charge Now And Why That Matters' had not been a favourite of the Woe, since the two people who actually needed the explanations had been less than interested in actually hearing them.

"Sometimes, Zeze, I feel like you only want me for my body," I drawled.

"Ridiculous," he sniffed. "Your soul is far more interesting. Your physiology is worth two treatises at most, it is unlikely to be a reproducible phenomenon."

"Get me candles and wine, at least," I suggested. "It just doesn't feel special otherwise."

"I thought you didn't drink wine any –" Masego frowned. "Wait, is this another sex thing I don't know about?"

For someone raised by a personification of desire, he could be surprisingly innocent. No, maybe not innocent. That implied he'd been sheltered, which I really doubted was the case. Ignorance born of disinterest. His blind spots were usually willing and damnably stubborn.

"Masego, I'm offended you would even imply that. Get your mind out of the gutter," I chided him, smothering a grin.

He looked mighty suspicious, but did not argue. He'd learned the hard way not to engage on this particular battlefield. I cleared my throat.

"So what's the damage?" I asked.

His brow creased.

"You're changing the subject," he muttered. "You always do that when you were lying just before."

"Calling me a liar is technically treason, you know," I pointed out.

"And that's bad, in Callow," he nodded slowly. "Even if you win."

Yeah, Warlock and the incubus had not done wonders for his moral compass. It was a work in progress.

"So?" I pressed.

"The Saint of Swords appears to have, for lack of a better term, cut Winter itself," Hierophant said.

"That much I'd guessed," I said. "I mean, practically speaking, what does that mean? Because I was having a Winter fit before she beat me like a goblin stepchild, but after I was back to normal. More or less."

"Temporary state of affairs," Masego said. "If you were hoping to maintain your hold on the mantle without being subject to principle alienation, you were sadly mistaken."

I coughed. I supposed it was too much to ask for that the Saint fuck up along the same lines as Akua had when she'd returned my full Name to me.

"I bruised, after the fight," I told Hierophant. "It faded before I got back to camp, but it actually hurt for a while. That hasn't happened since Liesse."

"I've already told you she cut Winter," Masego said, sounding befuddled. "The implications should be clear."

"Oh, absolutely," I lied. "But I need you to put it in layman's terms so that I can explain it to other people. Like, say, if I needed to tell Archer about this."

"She's actually quite well-versed in arcane dialectics," Masego noted. "Lady Ranger covered the workings of sorcery very well while teaching her to slay mages."

I wrinkled my nose.

"Lucky her," I said. "Black never went in depth."

"Uncle Amadeus never did have what could be considered a proper method in this," Hierophant shrugged. "As Father tells it, his approach has always been having a wide array of tools to employ against enemy weaknesses."

Which only helped me so much, I thought. Unlike my teacher I did not have several decades of scrapping against all sorts of spellcasters under my belt. To avoid running into nasty surprises, I'd largely delegated that kind of fighting to Masego himself.

"Juniper, then," I said.

The blind man bit his lip.

"I dislike using a metaphor, but so be it," he said. "Think of your mantle as a cape. Much like your body itself, it is a fixed object in the eyes of Creation."

"Which is why I can rebuild it from scratch when I lose parts," I noted. "Which does happen more often than I'd liked."

The mage's head bobbed in agreement.

"The main difference being that your body is a shape, while your mantle is a pattern of power," he said. "That power is, of course, finite. Not in the sense that using it spends it, but along the lines that the cape remains a cape – it does not grow or lessen, as a living thing would."

"So she cut the cape," I guessed.

"Essentially," he admitted. "You might say she cut out a corner of the cape. The pattern itself being fixed, the rest of the power thinned itself as a whole to recreate that corner."

My fingers clenched.

"Are you saying I have less to call on, now?" I said.

"Well, yes," Masego frowned. "Which I believed impossible, as power does not simply disappear, but evidently in this case it has. It is not unprecedented for heroes to violate Creational laws that apply to everyone else, but this is rather blatant even by their standards."

"She was a pretty straightforward old bat," I grunted. "So why did I bruise?"

"In the absence of Winter's full influence, Creation assumed you to be human again," Masego said. "With all the consequences that apply."

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a headache. That made it sound like my actual body was basically a trick played on Creation, which was exactly the kind of thing I'd been terrified of hearing for the last year. Fuck. I *really* wanted a stiff drink right now.

"So if she cuts me again in that manner," I said. "There'll be a window of opportunity where I'm mortal again?"

"You are still mortal," Masego said. "In the sense that you can be killed, at least. I give decapitation a better than half chance of working, though for obvious reasons we cannot test this. You would, however, lose the ability to reform for a span of time. An increase in fragility, though passing."

He didn't sound too happy about being unable to experiment with the removal of my head from my body, but I'd learned to ignore it when he was being an ass by accident. I rose to a sitting position as Hierophant got up and began methodically putting away the silvery instruments he'd used to have a look inside me. I didn't feel a great need to reach for my shirt, folded on a lower table

to the side. Being half-naked in front of Masego was like baring my ass to a potted plant – there was no real interest on the other side.

"We're getting close to the pivot for the campaign up here," I told him, rolling my shoulders to limber them. "That means a pitched battle, and likely revealing our shared trick."

Hierophant smiled.

"Good," he said. "I've been itching to prove the theory."

I grimaced. That proof was likely to kill a lot of people, but then there was only so far I was willing to go to preserve the lives of an invading army. Getting my own soldiers killed when I could avoid it wasn't on the table.

"Before that, I'm going to need you to mess with their scrying," I said. "We want them cut off from the Principate when they feel the pressure mounting."

The dark-skinned man shrugged.

"It is possible to accomplish," he said. "Their formulas are... rough-hewn. Easy enough to muddle. Yet doing so will require most my attention."

"That's fine," I said. "We've got a few more days left until it comes to a fight, by Juniper's reckoning."

"I could simply use the connection to kill their practitioners," Masego suggested. "It would require less sustained effort on my part."

I breathed out slowly.

"Do it," I said. "But spare at least five of them. I need them able to scry the Principate after the fight."

"This ought to be amusing," Hierophant chortled. "They've yet to properly master defensive wards against the law of sympathy."

"Try not to be too brutal," I sighed.

"An interesting limitation," he decided. "I will take it into consideration."

Well, at least he wasn't going to draw it out for kicks. Wasn't in his nature. That was really all I could ask for. I slid off the table and picked up my shirt, slipping it on as he finished his clean-up.

"I would wish you a good night," Masego said. "But you don't really sleep anymore, do you?"

"Might get some reading done," I said. "Reitz is a pain to learn."

"I am pleased you are expanding your horizons," he said, patting my shoulder awkwardly.

I couldn't help but smile. He really was trying, wasn't he? I pushed back one of his tresses fondly and bade him goodnight. My tent felt emptier for his absence, and the books I had piled up in a corner were a less than attractive prospect no matter what I'd told Masego. There were only so many histories you could read until they all kind of blended together. With a battle on the horizon, Juniper would either be sleeping or planning – either way, not to be disturbed. Vivienne was still presumably making her way back from her little jaunt in the crusader camps and Indrani was both away and probably busy bullying Robber. Larat was, well, *Larat*. I dropped into the seat I'd once 'liberated' from a fae stronghold, savouring the decadent cushioning. It was a strange thing, feeling

lonely in a war camp still thriving with activity even at this hour. I missed Hakram like one of my own limbs, the ache having only grown over time. It should perhaps worry me, I thought, how much I'd come to rely on him as a touchstone for my sanity. In the corner, draped over another seat, the Mantle of Woe waited silently.

"I grant you leash," I murmured. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

Akua Sahelian strode out of her prison with unearthly grace, clad in red and gold. I kind of resented that even with a gaping hole in her chest she remained stunningly beautiful.

"It has been some time," the Diabolist mused. "Longer than usual."

"I'm not speaking with Hasenbach before things are settled on the field," I said.

"Is that my only value to you, dearest?" she teased. "Another pair of eyes on your foe?"

"I'm not sure what you're trying to accomplish with the pet names," I noted. "It takes a little more than sweet talk and curves to get me going, Akua."

She laughed, clear as bell. I really had to commend whoever had taught her that, it made her sound almost pleasant.

"You believe I am attempting to use the fact that you are twice bloomed?" she asked, looking genuinely curious.

Genuine meant nothing, with that one. She could make it sound like she actually believed the sky was yellow if she tried.

"Bisexual, Akua," I said. "The word is *bisexual*. Seriously, what is it with Soninke and making everything sound like bad poetry?"

"Your own people have the unfortunate tendency of using simple terms for complicated matters," she chided.

Fluidly, she sat in the seat across from mine. She didn't actually need to, of course. She was little more than a soul, and the physical seat made no difference to her position. But villainy of the old breed did have a way of prizing style no matter the situation, I'd give them that.

"Darling, to have interest in mere gender is hopelessly rustic," she sighed. "Power is the only valuable measure. The superior looks of my people are simply a reflection of our ability to have them. The true worth of them is *implicit*."

"You'll excuse me if I don't take advice in that from the get of High Lords," I replied, rolling my eyes. "As I understand it, your take on break ups usually involves poison."

"For lesser lords, perhaps," Akua spoke with open disdain. "It is gauche to use anything but a dagger if there was real affection. Poison is a political tool, Catherine. When employed within one's direct circle, it represents a lack of faith in one's abilities."

"More ritualized murder from the Soninke crowd," I drawled. "There's a shocker."

"You must learn to discern between enmity and dialogue, if you are ever to rule the Empire," Akua said. "Your lowborn origins are not so much of a hindrance as you might think, but your Callowan roots mean you must never be anything but exquisite at the Great Game if you are to seen as more than a violent foreign thug."

"I really don't," I snorted. "Want to rule the Empire, for one, but also need to learn what you're talking about. Any culture that requires regular intervention by mass-murdering demigods to function doesn't *deserve* to keep existing."

"Then you declare war on the High Lords, my heart," Akua said. "As your teacher once desired. There is nothing but horror awaiting you on that path."

"There we go again," I noted. "I'm not your anything, Sahelian. Except killer, I guess, I'll own to that one. It did make my year."

"What other heart can I claim, dearest?" the Diabolist smiled, lightly tapping the edge of her wound. "You have bound me and taken me into your service."

"You're a tool, Akua," I bit out. "In all meanings of the word."

"And you think this is ungainly in my eyes?" the Soninke laughed. "That is only your due as victor."

It was an accomplishment, I decided, that even as a powerless shade she could still unsettle me. Best not to linger on the subject.

"Talk to me," I said, "about goblins. You were aiming to be God-Queen Bitch of Calernia, you must have taken them into consideration when planning."

The dark-skinned beauty studied me with a too-wide smile.

"They have approached you," she said. "The Council of Matrons."

"That's overstating it a bit," I said. "But inquiries were made, a few months ago."

She folded her hands in her lap.

"And now you speak to me," she mused. "Understandable. Among your most trusted, the two goblins are ignorant of the inner workings of the Tribes. Those that would know most are your two Taghreb, the bastard and the Bishara, yet their understanding will be... limited."

"Yours will be too," I said. "But you always had a way with digging out secrets, so you're worth hearing out."

"If you are to understand goblins, dearest, you must first grasp that their core nature is that of *scavengers*," Akua said. "Never have they risen in rebellion when the Empire was strong, and even in weakness they are patient."

"They don't fight armies if they avoid it, I already knew that," I frowned. "Which, considering their size and fragility as a species, is kind of a given."

"It runs deeper than this," Diabolist said. "Goblins will eat anything because they can never assume they will be able to forcefully claim what they need. To be one of their lot is to know from birth that most other life on Creation is larger and stronger. That death is always around the corner. Morality is, to a goblin, at best a distant concern. Bare survival always comes first, and in its pursuit they will commit acts that would given even a High Lord pause."

"Considering the neighbourhood, I can hardly blame them," I said.

"You do not grasp my point," Akua said. "The mindset is not a consequence of Praesi aggression. It does not ebb and flow with threats. It is the starting point of *every single goblin ever born*."

"Yes," I said patiently. "And Praesi think *demons* are a valid solution to, well, anything ever. My point is that they're not being unreasonable in thinking that way."

Akua smiled.

"You believe they've never dabbled in diabolism?" she said. "My dear, the Sahelians have known for decades that one of the primary ingredients in munitions is powdered devil. Our alchemists never managed to reproduce the process involved, but it is a certainty. Now, consider that goblinfire burns all things born of Creation. What do you think *that* recipe involves?"

My heart clenched.

"You can't be serious," I said. "They're using demons? How would that even work?"

"My people have studied both alchemy and diabolism for over a millennium," Akua said. "And we have absolutely no idea. Munitions are only created in the deepest tunnels, and those that take part in the process never see the light of day. There is a reason goblin mages are so rarely seen among the Legions: as a rule, they are sent below and never return."

Well, shit. Had I been throwing around burning demon juice at my enemies this whole time? Fucking Hells, that was going to take a while to process. I leant back into my chair.

"All right," I said. "So the Matrons are not to be trusted."

"This does not mean that they cannot be used," Akua said. "They never plot uprising unless they believe the Empire is on the verge of collapse, and that their own people might be drawn into the matter. This implies Malicia's hold over the Tower is not so solid as one might believe. The Matrons would not risk fighting an Empire united behind its Tyrant."

"Ashur sent a war fleet to seize the Tideless Isles," I told the shade. "What few reports I've managed to get on that say they're hitting anything near the coast that doesn't have walls."

"No a threat to be underestimated," Akua agreed. "Yet as long as the cities hold, the might of the Empire is not overly affected. Mere foreign incursion would not be enough to move them. Has your teacher returned to Praes since our... lively debate?"

"You mean that time where you murdered a hundred thousand of my countrymen," I said very mildly. "At which point I ripped out your fucking heart and Black wrecked your doomsday weapon."

"Yes," Diabolist lightly said. "That. Quite the eventful day. Whatever did happen to the wights, anyhow?"

I did not reply. I simply applied my will, and her hand rose up to plunge into the wound. I had her tear at her own insides, patiently listening to her

wretched screaming as she clawed at herself. After a while, I withdrew my will.

"I tend to disapprove of torture," I said. "But we're all cutting corners these days, aren't we?"

She stayed silent, panting.

"Your *victims* were released and buried," I said. "Even if I'd somehow been able to stomach keeping them, half of Callow would have risen in rebellion at the news. Now, prove yourself useful. Black has not returned to Praes since I carved out your soul and made it clothing. What do you get from that?"

"There has been break between him and the Empress," she got out. "She would have him killed if he returned, or at least that he believes this."

"Unless they're running a game," I pointed out. "Getting the opposition out in the open to cut them down in one stroke."

"If that were so," Diabolist said, "the Matrons would not have approached you. They must have reason to believe the split is not feigned."

Mhm. That made sense. And it meant that, down line, I might be able to find an ally of convenience within Praes.

"Back in the box, Akua," I said. "And if you ever again speak so casually of what you've done, I'll sit down with Masego to figure out if shades can lose limbs."

I withdrew all I had granted her, and she vanished into thin air. I closed my eyes, tired in a way sleep could not remedy.

This battle wasn't even done, and already I had to prepare for those that would follow.

Chapter 13

Élevé

> "Civilized men disapprove of murder, of course. Unless it involves banners and great numbers: then it becomes one's patriotic duty."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

We knew Thief had succeeded days before she returned. The crusader host had begun a hard march south, at a harder pace than they'd ever taken before. Malanza was working her soldiers to exhaustion, and we knew exactly why: Vivienne had emptied their stores. Larat had gated General Hune and her army at their back once since then, to break the supply lines again, but they'd not even bothered to send an army to chase the ogre's soldiers away. The implication was that the foodstuffs coming from Procer were too few and infrequent to feed the number of hungry mouths she now had to deal with, and Thief confirmed as much when she stumbled back into camp.

"Heroes were busy with you or your minions," Vivienne said. "I had almost a full hour before someone noticed the stores were emptying."

"They didn't pursue?" I asked.

"They tried," she shrugged. "But they had nothing that could see through my aspect, apparently. Or at least no Named that *could* and came close to me."

And with that, the preparations for our battle were done. We had Princess Rozala Malanza's army exactly where we wanted it: tired, undersupplied, and forced to march on Hedges or starve. There was serious debate among the general staff about retreating even further south to stretch those advantages out, but in the end we decided against it. Any further and we were entering the heartlands of the Barony of Hedges. Assuming we won the battle, some defeated soldiers would flee into the countryside and the last thing I wanted was a few thousand deserters ravaging the region out of desperation. The Army of Callow folded back into a single entity, with the addition of a thousand members of the Watch. That brought us to slightly over twenty-two thousand soldiers, in whole. Against over fifty thousand crusaders, twelve – perhaps eleven if I'd mangled Two Knives enough, but I wasn't relying on that when they had

healers – heroes and who the Hells knew how many priests. Enough that scrying the crusader host directly had been a wash for months, anyway, and given the sprawling stretch of their war camps it had to be a least a few hundreds. My side boasted a few sharp knives as well, at least: Hierophant, well-trained mage lines, five thousand of the finest heavy cavalry on Calernia and Pickler's vicious war engines.

The first enemy banners came in sight midmorning.

Yellow striped across red, with three white lions. That was the Prince of Orne's own, if memory served, and the lesser banners beneath it kept to those same three colours. In the Principate, the heraldry of lesser nobles beneath a prince had use of only that's prince's palette. That led to an orgy of improvisation, most of it patently absurd to look at – like the red lion with a yellow pig in its mouth set on white I first saw not a half-hour later. The vanguard was pure Alamans. First came the horse, with rich armour and richer pennants, then a mass of five thousand fantassins. I'd not forgotten the lecture had given me on Proceran soldiery. Most their armies were levies raised and kept only for the length of the latest war, poorly equipped and barely trained. Vulnerable to shock tactics, why was why Procerans tended to put such an emphasis on light cavalry. Peasants with shitty spears tended run when a wedge of glittering charged at them. The second kind of soldiery was the one before me: fantassins. Former levies who'd lost everything in the wars or gained a taste for the soldier's life, and now served in companies of their own making – though usually on the take from one prince or another. Leather and mail armour, wooden shields and longswords. Most of them were also carrying javelins, though, and that was more worrying. A well-thrown javelin would punch through a Legion regular's mail if it came from close enough.

The last was principality troops, the personal armies of the many royals of Procer. Heavy infantry, mostly sword and board soldiers though their shields were lighter and smaller than Legion standard issue. They also had archer companies, which might get nasty. Legion crossbowmen tended to shoot further and stronger than any archer not using longbows, but I had relatively few of them and the rate of fire for a properly-trained archer was better. Juniper had raised crossbow companies when forging the Army of Callow, but in skirmished like that numbers often carried the day and those wouldn't be on our side. The last principality soldiers were the cavalry. Light horse, most of them, since only the Lycaonese relied on heavy charges and there were none among the opposition. Our last count had the opposing cavalry at almost eleven thousand, more than double the Order of Broken Bells. Baroness Ainsley's two hundred knights did little to even the odds, though they were still welcome.

The enemy vanguard stayed a mile away, not even remotely inviting an engagement. I wasn't surprised. We'd waited for the crusader here for a day, and Juniper had my army at work the entire time. Field fortifications had been raised, trenches dug and siege engines set over low hills of beaten earth. Attacking us in our entrenchments without numerical superiority was suicide.

Not that it prevented a few hundred enemy horse from parading out of crossbow range, banners waving in the breeze. Juniper sent out the Watch to clear them out, and they retreated after the first volley – which, sadly, killed no more than a dozen.

"Trying to gauge longbow range, you think?" I mused, eyes flicking to the Hellhound.

I was astride Zombie while the stood by her command table, surrounded by her staff. Easy for *her* to do, I thought bitterly. If I was on the ground, I wouldn't even see beyond our reserves. Everyone was so fucking tall, it was really unacceptable.

"They should already have a notion," the orc growled. "Not like it's changed much in the last few hundred years. No, they were just arrogant little pups out to posture."

And they'd lost half a line of their buddies for it. *And that's why you don't let nobles run an army*, I thought. Or at least not Proceran nobles. The Old Kingdom had done fairly well relying on its own.

"I dislike just leaving them out there," I noted, gesturing at the five thousand infantry in the distance.

"Bait," Juniper said. "There'll be heroes, I bet. And if we sent enough soldiers to swat them away, we'll weaken the fortifications for when the real army arrives. Let them come."

I sighed. She was probably right. It didn't make any more pleasant to stew in the sun while the crusaders lumbered towards our battle. By noon, the amount of cavalry in the distance had doubled. The spread of colours among banners had expanded. Blue, black, green. Wyverns and dragons and horses. Our own were less... exotic. The Fifteenth's banner still flew, with my own personal heraldry besides it: scales, with the sword and the crown. The Order of Broken Bells had its own as well, but aside from that the only departure was the flock of starlings on blue that belonged to House Morley of Harrow. The infantry swelled as the hours passed, and before Noon Bell was at an end the enemy had fully arrived. I puffed at my pipe, watching the mass of shining steel ahead. There weren't as many on the field today as there'd been at Second Liesse, but there were more *soldiers*. It was going to be a very different kind of battle.

"You think they'll open with Named?" Juniper asked.

I shook my head.

"They've got veterans on the other side," I said. "Heroes that have been around for long enough to know you don't open with Named. The first will come out the moment we start winning on one side of the field."

It would take careful managing, we both knew. Heroes could not be left alone. Most of them would scythe straight through even hardened infantry and their mere presence could turn a rout into a stubborn line of defence. On the other hand, my side didn't have the *numbers* to hammer down every hero that popped up. In a contest of Named, I was short more than a few. And Thief

hardly counted, considering she wasn't a fighter. Hierophant and I could punch pretty hard, but on the other hand if our army started *needing* us to win then it became essentially guaranteed that some hero would cut us down. Best case, we'd be driven off the field, but best case wasn't something to count on when there was the Saint and the Pilgrim on the other side.

"Priority's teasing out whatever they intended to use as the northern passage if we blocked them," I said. "That's too dangerous an unknown to allow Malanza to keep sitting on it."

I'd gotten an oath about the opposition not calling on angels, but the Pilgrim would never have agreed to that if his crew didn't have other weapons to wield. With Praesi, it was the sorcerers you had to worry about. With the Procerans, though? My money was on the priests. I leaned forward, watching the crusaders in the distance, and frowned. Was that? Yeah, no two ways about it. They were moving carts and pitching tents.

"They're making camp," I told Juniper.

The orc snorted.

"How prudent of them," she said. "Malanza must think there'd a decent chance it'll take more than a day to exterminate us. I doubt she'll be going for attrition with her boys' stomachs going empty, but she'll be generous in trading soldiers."

"*Our* camp is the largest concentration of foodstuffs between here and Hedges," I said. "If she's desperate. . . "

"She knows we can gate out if it gets to that," Juniper replied, shaking her head. "No, this is just her hedging her bets. We'll see the first skirmishers moving out within the hour, mark my words."

The Hellhound, for once, was proved wrong. She'd not misread the military, as it happened, but the political. A party of four riders under truce banner rode out, stopping halfway between our camps. I went to meet them. I could have brought Juniper and Hierophant, or even Baroness Ainsley as the ranking noble with the army, but that would just be posturing. On this field, I was the one making decisions for my side. Zombie trotted out cheerfully, the sun pounding down at us until I sat in the saddle across from the crusader delegation. There were some familiar faces there. The Saint and the Pilgrim, though they were at the back. The old woman discreetly sliced her finger across her throat when I glanced at her. Charming. The Grey Pilgrim inclined his head in greeting and I did the same, before taking in the other two. The man was much older than the woman, at least late forties. Prince Amadis Milenan, at a guess. To my surprise, he was good-looking. I'd expected some caricature of a Chancellor, but instead what I got was very well-groomed older man with fair hair and a chiselled jaw. The other – Princess Rozala Manlanza, most likely – was maybe a few years older than me. Dark eyes and darker curls, with the kind of wicked easy smile that belonged more on Laure tavern girl than foreign royalty.

"Afternoon," I said. "I'd say welcome to Callow, but I see you've already made yourself at home."

I punctuated with a nod at the army behind them.

"Queen Catherine," the older man said, bowing ever so slightly. "I am Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre."

"So I'd guessed," I said. "I already know the two greyhairs in the back. Should I assume the curvy one measuring me up is Princess Malanza?"

"Are you trying to seduce your way out of this, Black Queen?" the woman in question asked, sounding amused.

"Unfortunately I have a strict non-invading Callow clause for people I let into my bed," I said. "I'll take that as a yes, by the way. You took your sweet time getting here, Malanza."

"My supplies inexplicably disappeared into thin air," the princess drawled. "Slowed us down some. I don't suppose you'd happen to know where they went?"

"Must have been rats," I said sympathetically. "Callow's had a vermin problem, these last few months."

"What a coincidence," Malanza said. "We've come to remedy that very issue."

Shit. Now I kind of liked her. I'd probably feel a least a little bad about putting her head on a pike down the line. Prince Amadis cleared his throat.

"I must implore you to excuse the uncouthness of my general," he said. "The prospect of battle wearies her, as it does all of us."

"I'm not a stickler on etiquette," I smiled. "Trying to sell chunks of Callow, though? That does get on my nerves a bit."

Not a trace of dismay passed on the princes' face, though I knew he couldn't be pleased about the Watch turning on him. Duchess Kegan had been less than impressed by the man, as it happened. He'd promised her both Laure and Denier when she'd pushed, which she'd taken as meaning he would have double-crossed her the moment he could.

"Preparing for peace is hardly treachery," Amadis said. "You are outnumbered in both Named and men, Queen Catherine. Let us not spill blood unreasonably. I have terms of surrender to offer, should you be willing."

I glanced at the Grey Pilgrim, whose serenity was unruffled by this. Did they seriously expect to fold *now*?

"You would have to abdicate, naturally," the Prince of Iserre said. "But I would title you Princess of the Blessed Isle, and grant you the eastern half of the lands currently in the rule of the governorship of Summerholm."

"Huh," I said. "And you heroes would respect those terms?"

"We would," the Grey Pilgrim said, sending the Saint a quelling look when it looked like she'd speak up.

"It this the part," I mused, "where I'm supposed to be thankful about you trying to make me your marcher lord at the frontier with *Praes*? Let's not even touch the part where you're carving up Callow between your supporters, because then I'll lose my fucking temper and we're under a truce banner."

"You cannot win this war," Prince Amadis sharply said. "This must be obvious by now."

"Malanza's face is blank," I said, pointing at the princess. "That's because she's trying not to smile. That should tell you more or less what I think of your offer. Now, here's mine."

I let out a long breath.

"Go home," I said. "I'll even provide enough supplies you don't starve on the way out, though you'll have to pay for them and there'll be a 'I shouldn't have fucking invaded another country' markup. You'll find nothing here but death, so just go home and settle your pissing match with Hasenbach out of my homeland. If you cross the passage, I will not pursue."

I glanced at the princess of Aequitan.

"That holds for after someone runs him through," I told her. "Leave, and you will not be harassed on the way out. I don't particularly want to fight this war, Malanza. It ends the moment you *let* it."

"Are you threatening me under peace banner?" Prince Amadis Milenan calmly said.

"I'm telling you I'm about to stop being nice about this," I told him. "I've bent over backwards to limit the damage, but if it comes to a battle a lot of people are going to die for very stupid reasons. And to be blunt, they'll be yours more than mine. We could avoid that entirely and both be better off."

"This is a crusade, Catherine Foundling," the Saint of Swords said. "Not a petty invasion. You do not make *truce* with holy war."

"There's no point in talking to you, Saint," I sighed. "You're Ranger with a shiny coat of paint and a socially acceptable pretext for killing."

The old woman's face darkened.

"You're going to lose a hand for that," she said.

"Amateur," I dismissed. "I've spent years dealing with Wastelanders, you second-rate bully. You think you've got a single threat that can shake me? I used to answer to a woman who uses a fucking demon as a gatekeeper has an entire hallway of forever screaming heads. Your notion is bad is her *starting point*."

I barrelled on before she could reply.

"I'll keep to the terms I agreed on with the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "Where are we falling on prisoner exchanges?"

"No guarantees," Malanza said. "Should there be worthwhile trades to make, you will be approached under banner."

Translation: she was sitting on any men of mine she caught unless I got my hands on someone high up enough the ladder it would be politically inconvenient to leave there.

"There doesn't have to be a battle," the Saint said. "You and me, girl. Here and now. We settle it the old way."

I glanced at her skeptically.

"Last time we scrapped you beat me like a rented mule," I said. "I'm not getting anywhere near you without a mage company and half a dozen ballistas. Pass."

"Cowardice is an ugly thing," the old woman smiled.

"The chorus of the side with the bigger swords," I shrugged. "If that's all, I have an army to lead."

"Such generous terms of surrender will not be offered again," Prince Amadis warned.

"I'm feeling generous too, Proceran," I smiled. "So when I sent your head on a pike back to Salia, your soul won't be bound to it."

And on this particularly diplomatic note, I spurred Zombie away and returned to my host.

Within the hour, skirmishers on both sides advanced.

Chapter 14

Arabesque

> "So spoke His Dread Majesty in the wake of battle, even as the High Lords praised him: 'Speak not flattering untruths. Another such victory and I will rule an empire of ghosts.' "
>
> Extract from 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'

It began.

When Juniper had sent our skirmishers out, we'd been able to scrape together four thousand including the Watch. Crossbowmen, human and goblins, with one thousand deadly Deoraithe longbowmen at the back – when the enemy began returning fire, these were the ones I wanted the lightest casualties for. They were too useful and too few to waste on opening exchanges. Malanza sent forward nine fucking thousand men, and we were pretty sure that wasn't even all she could field. The opposition apparently had much the same thought as we'd had, because the first wave to come in longbow range wasn't principality troops: it was levies. I sucked in a breath, eyes making them out perfectly regardless of distance. Men too old and too young, with hunting bows instead of the kind of weapons a battlefield required. Some even had slings, which Juniper noted out loud some Arlesite principalities were known for. The Watch nocked, drew and fired without a word. At least a hundred levies died in the first mass volley as the Proceran skirmishers advanced, closing range. Conscripted peasants taking arrows so that the personal forces of princes would not. The sight of it had me gritting my teeth.

"It's sound tactics, no matter how much you glare," Juniper said. "Gets the people who can properly return fire in range without losses."

"I know," I said, fingers clenching. "I know it is."

But how many kids and greybeards who'd just died had actually *wanted* to be on this field? I couldn't know for sure, but Principate rulers had full right of conscription as their Gods-given birth right. They didn't even to justify it, not like nobles had in the Old Kingdom – where only foreign invasion had

granted that temporary privilege to aristocrats. The sickening thing was that many of them probably did want to be there. Because priests and princes had told them this was a holy war instead of Hasenbach trying to kill two problems with one stone or Amadis and his cronies making a play for the throne. I wasn't so much a hypocrite as to damn them for it. I was well aware that the main reason my own army fielded only enlisted was that I'd had neither the funds nor equipment to raise and keep the amount of soldiers a general conscription would have brought. My fingers remained clenched anyway. Making decisions where part of my forces were openly deemed more expendable than others hadn't grown any more pleasant with time, that unspoken admission that some lives were worth more than others.

"More kids than I'd thought," my Marshal said after a moment, eyeing the enemy through a scrying bowl. "That's interesting. Either she's sounding out whether we'll flinch at killing those, or they came closer than we thought to scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"Hasenbach's problem is a surplus of fantassins, not a lack," I said.

"These aren't fantassins, Catherine, they're levies," the Hellhound said. "Those boys we're putting holes in look like they should be working fields and trades, not fighting in a war."

I frowned.

"You think they're having manpower issues?" I sceptically said. "So far, between the three armies, they're fielding about one hundred and twenty thousand men. Their population can take that. We know that for a fact, you've read the same reports I have."

"On parchment, maybe," Juniper grunted. "But looking at them now I have to wonder. The civil war hurt the south pretty bad and they didn't even have a full decade to recover. The north was spared, but it has to keep soldiers on the walls to deal with the ratlings. We might need to consider the possibility that Hasenbach didn't forge her Grand Alliance just to keep her borders secure. That she might have needed the troops as well, and that if she loses enough soldiers some parts of Procer will collapse."

My reflex was to disagree, but I forced myself to stop and think. There was some sense in that. The First Prince's issue with fantassins was that she had several armies' worth of them floating around without a war to fight or skills to ply in peace time. I'd taken that as meaning she had manpower to toss into the flames, but that was not necessarily be true. It might not be a surplus of people so much as surplus of the *wrong* kind of people. If Juniper was right and killing levies meant scything through the same men and women who should be keeping Procer functioning... Well, there was a chance that down the line principalities would have bow out of the crusade because they literally could not afford more losses. Which was a mixed blessing. Parts of the Principate withdrawing would ease off the pressure on Callow, but it might also lead to internal instability in Procer itself. Which, in some ways, would be helpful. Procer, if eating at itself, wasn't mucking around in my homeland.

But it also gave Black and Malicia a much freer hand, which was almost as dangerous. *And if the instability takes Hasenbach off the throne...* Honestly, I wasn't fundamentally opposed to that. The chances of the next First Prince or Princess being as dangerous as Cordelia Hasenbach were fairly slim. On the other hand, I knew Hasenbach. I'd made a study of her, we had a personal relationship. Whoever replaced her would be an unknown and that carried risks.

There were already too many of those in this war, and wind picking up a third of the way through the tightrope was bad news all around.

While I'd been wrestling with the thoughts, the skirmish had turned bloody. We had range and rate of fire on the enemy, but they outnumbered my people by more than twice over. The first half hour was a one-sided massacre. Between the Watch and the crank crossbows, we carved a red swath through the levies. But then the professional soldiers of the the enemy got in range to shoot back, and I stirred uneasily atop Zombie when I saw wooden shafts begin raining down. Goblins were a smaller target than humans and my men were spread out loosely according to Legion doctrine, while the enemy remained in tight packs. That helped some, keeping the exchange of lives at about parity even with the lopsided numbers. The hard truth, though, was that Malazanza could afford to trade her entire skirmishing contingent for mine and walk away with a strategic victory.

"Juniper," I said.

"Another two volleys, Foundling," the Hellhound said.

"We're barely denting the principality troops," I sharply replied.

"Levies we kill now aren't covering the first wave against our palisades," the Marshal of Callow replied. "It's a worthwhile trade."

Another two volleys, like she had said, and then the horns sounded the retreat. The Watch, I saw, had not lost so much as a single man. When the enemy had advanced, they'd retreated equally and kept killing all the while without missing a beat. If Ratface's discreet following of Deoraithe spending over the last year had not made it clear how ridiculously expensive training and arming them was, I would have been livid with envy. As it was, I was merely very jealous. The enemy skirmishers had little stomach for pursuit. They'd killed and wounded nearly a thousand of my crossbowmen, but at three times the cost – and most of those dead, not just bleeding. Juniper's order to withdraw was coming just ahead of the point in the cold lay of arithmetic where the skirmish would become costlier than it was useful.

"Marshal," one of her aides spoke up. "Enemy cavalry is moving."

My eyes flicked to the side. Malanza had been traditional in the arraignment of her forces. Three thick waves of infantry in the centre, with four thousand cavalry on each side and another four thousand in reserve at the back with what looked like a few thousand principality troops. A hard-hitting reserve that she could pour into whatever breach her foot managed to make. The cavalry contingents on both sides were on the move, though. Riding ahead of

the crusader host, converging on my skirmishers from the flanks. Only at a trot for now, but when they got close enough they'd charge.

"Probe?" I asked the Hellhound.

"If they don't hurry the fuck up, our soldiers are back well within siege range before the horse gets anywhere close," Juniper said. "That'd be... costly, for her. They might be trying to bait out the Broken Bells."

"Talbot could hit one of the flanks hard and withdraw before her foot gets there, or even the other cavalry wing," I noted. "This seems like..."

Trumpets sounded from the other side, and after a few moments of milling around the enemy skirmishers began to pursue.

"That's," I began, but closed my mouth.

What the Hells was Malanza up to? She had to know that if her archers got in killing range of our trebuchets and ballistas it'd be a godsdamned massacre. Even if her cavalry hit at the same time. We'd lose crossbowmen, sure, but a heavy formation of advancing enemies would be a sapper's wet dream. And she'd lose twice as many soldiers when her people broke and fled, especially if the Broken Bells sallied to hit them on the way out.

"Juniper?" I tried.

The orc did not respond. She'd gone utterly still, eyes fixed on the approaching enemy. She barely even breathed or blinked.

"Her infantry isn't moving," Juniper said.

"I can see that," I replied flatly.

The meat of Princess Malanza's infantry had yet to move, still standing in the distance.

"Her infantry isn't moving," the Hellhound slowly said, "because it doesn't *need* to."

Which made no sense to me. Not with the forces the enemy had set in motion. Cavalry and skirmishers, this close to our engines?

"Full retreat," Juniper barked at the closest horn blower. "Break formation."

The officer blinked, then sounded the calls. I did not know the orc's reasons yet, but I did know better than to gainsay her instincts when it came to battle. The crossbowmen scattered and legged it as the Watch ceased firing and put their supernatural swiftness to full work. What was the play here? Already the Deoraithe were in siege range, and the goblins among the crossbowmen weren't that far behind. The greenskins could scuttle quick as spiders no matter the terrain. *It's not about the forces, then*, I decided. *They still matter, but only as part of a larger tactic.* Something was missing, and that thought was a familiar one. Juniper and I both had it before, when wondering why Rozala Malanza would try to take her army through a narrow passage my men could hold the end of. And the conclusion, I remembered as my blood ran cold, was that she'd had something up her sleeve we didn't know about.

Three heartbeats later we learned.

From the beginning, we'd dismissed the notion that the crusaders would use their priests the same way we did mages, for sorcerous artillery and shock

tactics. Brother and sisters of the House of Light were not supposed to take the lives of others. We'd theorized there would be some willing to break those vows, and that they would be a threat to deal with. But aside from this, we'd believed the priests would be a purely defensive and support asset. Our failure, Rozala Malanza taught us, had been one of imagination. Ahead of the retreating Watch, panes of light bloomed. At least forty feet tall, though thin. *A fence*, I realized. *They are fencing them in.* Pane after pane formed, boxing in our retreating skirmishers in the span of time it'd take me to light a pipe. An opening was left, at the back. Where the enemy bowmen paused and put their formation in order, as on both sides of them the Proceran cavalry began to charge.

"Tell Pickler to fire at will," Juniper barked at the closest mage.

The message passed and the twenty heavy ballistas fired their stones. The first volley hit the fence at a high angle, and the stones broke without even visibly affecting it. The trebuchets threw their load in the moment that followed, arcing high over the fence straight at the enemy archers. They never reached the crusaders. More fences formed over their heads. Some rocks shattered, others bounced off. The broken remnants remained on the light, as if it were a physical thing. I gestured for another mage to attend me.

"Get me Hierophant," I said.

The rectangular silver mirror in the man's hands shivered after he got out his incantation, revealing Masego's face. He was currently with the mage lines, and already I regretted not having him at my side.

"Hierophant," I said. "You see the fences?"

"Miracle work," he said. "Interesting use of priestly powers."

"Shut them down," I said. "*Now*."

He nodded, and after a shiver all the mirror showed was my own reflection. My fingers clenched as I watched the first volley from the Proceran bowmen hit my skirmishers, all on the left wing. *They're concentrating their volleys, I thought*. Annihilation tactics. They did not intend to leave any survivors. My soldiers returned a ragged volley of their own, save for the Watch. Throwing hooks above the fences, the Deoraithe found physical purchase and began to climb. I had hope, for a moment. Until the fences above the Proceran archers angled to drop the remaining stones harmlessly in front of the crusaders and disappeared. They shortly after reappeared above the fences keeping my skirmishers boxed in, cutting cleanly through ropes and hooks. Fuck. The colder, calm part of me noted that they'd had to dismiss some fences to add them elsewhere. That implied there was a limited amount they could make. Commanded by Masego, my mage lines gave answer. Seven massive spears of lightning began to form above our fortifications, strengthening with every heartbeat.

"Pickler," Juniper growled behind me, standing in front of a scrying bowl. "I want continuous fire on those archers. Don't stop even if it doesn't go through."

On the other side of the field, sorcery flared up.

Hierophant had torn through their mages for two days before they stopped trying to scry, and it has cost them at least twenty practitioners. They had easily ten times that many left, though, and Archer had confirmed at least one of the heroes looked wizardly. If it came to a sorcerous pissing match, I would still bet on my own men. They'd been taught rituals by Hierophant, and more than a third were both Praesi and Legion-trained. Procer was a magical backwater, if it came to trading blows they should come out on the losing side. Which was, I saw as the enemy sorcery took shape, why Malanza had ordered them to do nothing of the sort. Praesi magical shields tended to be translucent and tinged blue, when not entirely transparent. The Proceran equivalent was opaque and yellow. Four layers came down in front of the fences even as the spears of lightning shot out. My mages were better, as I had thought. All four layers broke under the screaming storm of lightning. But by the time the sorcery reached the fences it had been weakened enough they merely shuddered under the impact. Layered defence, the cold part of me noted. Clever. The rest of me bit my lip until it bled, as I realized the crusaders were just going to slug it out like this again and again until all my skirmishers were dead.

"Juniper," I called out, the orc turning to meet my gaze. "Broken Bells?"

She cursed virulently in Kharsum but nodded. The horns sent out our five thousand knights into the fray, palisades opening to let them stream out. Would it be enough? No, I already knew. It wouldn't. But it might lower the damage of this from disaster to wound. Talbot had his knights form into a wedge the moment they had the room, galloping out to the left to hit half the enemy cavalry even as Pickler's engines hammered the fences above the crusader archers repeatedly. They held anyways. I knew better than to get my hopes up, and my pessimism was rewarded when the forward sides of the fences keeping my skirmishers contained winked out. They reappeared in a long diagonal in front of the advancing Broken Bells and my fingers clenched once more. Not a single of the knights died, but the length of the fence was unbreakable and forced them to take the long way around. Keeping them away long enough that the enemy horse would reach my skirmishers unimpeded. With a mixture of grief and pride, I saw that my crossbowmen were in formation and returning fire. They took the losses from the enemy archers, ignoring them for a hard volley into the tip of both Proceran cavalry contingents. Horses fell and screamed, men went down. The charge continued. The remainder of the Watch split in half, heading for the edges of the fences on both sides.

Masego, I knew, would not take lightly that he had been thwarted even once. The lack of lightning spears forming in the sky to answer the yellow shields that had come down a second time heralded that he would have gotten... creative, and when my old friend unleashed his wrath he did methodically. A jagged shard of red light bloomed and struck the first shield. The yellow sorcery shattered, but the shard remained. Another shard formed, and struck the back of the first shard like a hammer on a chisel. The second shield broke. It was working, but too slow. The Watch was getting away but the Pro-

ceran cavalry hit my skirmishers and it was a massacre. They tore through the first three ranks like wet parchment before the momentum was even slightly slowed. Another shard formed and the third shield broke when it hit – and then the fourth shield as well, a heartbeat later. They were accumulating strength, I grasped. The light fence shuddered but held. In the handful of heartbeats before the fourth shard formed and hit, at least a thousand of my men died as I watched in silence. When the light finally broke it was too late for them to even run. The riders were already among them.

"Pickler," Juniper said quietly. "All ballistas are to fire into the cavalry. Keep the trebuchets on the the archers."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. The orc's face was grim as she met my gaze. The siege engines, we both knew, would kill our crossbowmen as well as the cavalry. But those men had been dead the moment the Proceran horse reached them, the cold part of me assessed. This way, at least, the ranks furthest back could be salvaged. The salvo pulped soldiers and horses alike when it hit. Theirs and mine both. I felt wintry, vicious rage well up in my veins. For a moment I indulged the wind-like whispers and the poisonous comfort they brought, but then I dragged my mind back to clarity. Pickler managed another handful of hits on the enemy horse, but less than a hundred died from them. They were already retreating and cavalry was hard to hit with mostly static engines. Especially when fences bloomed to cover their retreat, as Malanza smoothly arranged. My surviving men fled back to the palisade. We had sent four thousand onto the field, Juniper and I.

A bare thousand returned, more than half of it Watch.

"We have," Juniper spoke into the graveyard silence of the general staff, "underestimated Princess Malanza."

In the distance, trumpets sounded again and the Proceran infantry began to advance as the forces that had engaged pulled back. In front of them, seven lone silhouettes took the lead. *Good*, I coldly thought.

I was in a killing mood.

Chapter 15

Bravura

> "And so my reign ends as it began, with fewer allies than stab wounds."
>
> Alleged last words of Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

"Tell me about those fences," I said.

Hierophant had gained back a few pounds, enough that his thinned frame looked full again. How he'd managed that on army rations I had no idea, but the mystery was not a fresh one: he'd gone through both the Rebellion and the Arcadian Campaign without losing weight. I'd been half-convinced that it was a self-perception anchored deep enough that his Name enforced it, until he'd wasted away in the Observatory. He'd still come a long way from the bespectacled boy I'd once known. These days he looked, well, *dangerous*. There might have been little muscle to his frame, but he stood tall – taller than me, but then who didn't? – and the long trinket-woven braids going down his back leant him a certain panache. The black eye cloth covering his glass eyes matched the permanently dishevelled black robes that were the only thing he bothered to wear anymore, not that he'd even been prone to indulging in fashionable clothes. The power he now so casually wielded clung to him even when unused, half-felt wisps of sorcery never quite gone. Masego had been perhaps the most destructive of my companions even back when he'd been the Apprentice, but he'd rarely seemed anything but awkward and a little pedantic when he wasn't casting. Now, though? He looked like the kind of sorcerer you didn't walk away from fighting. It suited him.

"A lecture on the nature of priestly power is out of the question, I suppose," the dark-skinned man sighed.

"Ask me again when an army isn't marching towards us," I said.

"That's almost never," he muttered under his breath. "Very well. Though weaker – diluted, according to some theories – than the Light we have seen heroes wield, the essential nature of priest miracles is the same. That is the stuff these fences were made of."

"Can it kill soldiers?" I asked.

"No," he shook his head. "As a reflection of oaths taken, the miracle should not be able to hurt anything living."

Well, that was something. From the way the fences had cut straight through hooks and rope, I'd have to assume it could wreck armour and fortifications if they hit at the right angle. That was... problematic. We'd raised the palisades in the first place because we needed them as an equalizer for crusader numbers. If they could just cut them down at will, that measure was gone.

"Next time the priests try the fences, can you just hit them directly to interrupt?" I asked.

Reluctantly, the mage shook his head.

"Mass sorcery at great distance needs a scrying tangent to be aimed properly," he said. "Unless it is fired blindly. Priests, as you well now, disrupt scrying."

So, unless Malanza blundered by putting all her priests in our field of vision and clustered together smothering the fences in the crib wasn't an option. This just kept getting better, didn't it?

"Then we need to have an immediate answer ready for when they do appear," I said flatly. "I'll need you with me for the brawl, so the mage lines will have to handle it."

I flicked a questioning glance at him at that, inviting him to pass judgement. I heard his left eye twist inside his skull towards me, but he did not reply. Right, subtle cues. Not his strength.

"*Can* they handle it?" I asked.

"They can cast the Ripper without me," Masego agreed, and elaborated when my eyebrow rose. "The red light constructs we used for the second exchange."

"That's..." I sighed. "I need a little more than that, Masego. Would wards work?"

"Against miracles, they are mostly useless," Hierophant noted. "The spectrums are too different, there is little overlap. We would have a great deal more success targeting their mages."

"Priests wouldn't screw with that?" I frowned.

"Unlikely," he said. "Remember the precision they formed those shields with, and at such distance. That cannot be obtained without scrying or other means of relayed direct sight. Having priests among them would make that impossible, implying the mages stand alone. I'll add that whoever designed that strategy has a keen understanding of all forces involved, which is quite rare even among Praesi. Rather impressive."

So either they had a very skilled wizard on the other side, or the Grey Pilgrim had contributed to Malanza's battle plans. I hoped it was the latter, because the enemy had enough advantages already without having someone even remotely in Masego's league to field.

"Order them to target the mages first," I finally said. "The fences will be trouble enough on their own, we can't afford for wizards to give them additional staying power. Inform Juniper's staff I gave the order, too, I don't want them in the dark."

The blind man nodded, idly tracing a circle of silver light in the air with a fingertip and inserting a scrying spell within. I looked on in interest for a moment, since that was definitely a new trick. I'd been under the impression there needed to be a physical anchor for scrying, but apparently Hierophant had figured out a cheat. I left him to it, leaning my elbows against the top of the palisade. The two of us were on a wooden walkway, between two rising slopes where Pickler's repeating scorpions would be pushed up when the enemy got close enough. We had thirty of those overall, a massive amount of siege weaponry even by Legion standards. It meant we were light on combat sappers, since those same soldiers had to attend the engines instead, but sharpers and charges weren't going to win us this battle. Not against fifty thousand hero-led Procerans. And, speaking of the devils. The crusader host had lumbered forward, its three infantry waves advancing slowly as the cavalry wings retreated to cover their flanks. In front of the first wave, though, the same seven silhouettes I'd glimpsed earlier were pulling ahead. Heroes. Three sword and board, I noted. Men and woman. Another I recognized from a previous fight, the same priest who'd engaged me as backup for the Saint. No sign of Two Knives or the red-robed mage, but I knew better than to assume a vicious crippling had been enough to keep the heroine I'd mangled out of the fight.

Hopefully she'd already had all three of her aspects, because if she hadn't she'd likely popped one out since designed to screw me over. Clearing out the heroes that had come into Callow over the winter had taught me that a hero having an undefined aspect just meant that the Heavens had the means to teach their hatchet men a trick to counter one of my own. They were rarely subtle about it, too, which was kind of insulting. It would have been polite to be less obvious in their attempts to stack the fight for their side. Of the last remaining three heroes, I recognized another. The man with the hammer I'd ignored when riding with the Hunt. The other two were unknowns: one muscly, barefooted woman with a staff that could mean she was either a sort of priest or fighter. And a boy that could not have been older than sixteen, with a greatsword propped over his shoulder that was nearly as tall as he was. And didn't wear a helmet, because of course he fucking didn't.

"It is done," Masego said, coming to stand by my side again.

I nodded slowly.

"You remember our training?" I asked.

"Healers die first," he recited dutifully. "Then practitioners, then I must constrain the enemy to ease your task or prevent outside intervention."

"It doesn't look like they have a mage with them, but that just means they're holding the man back in reserve," I said. "Watch for that. And if the Saint of Swords ever tries to close distance with you. . . "

"Flee," he completed. "I must never let her be closer than ninety feet."

"And that's the conservative estimate," I grunted. "She didn't even use an aspect to smack me around, Masego. She starts getting serious, don't think in victory terms. Escape and containment, while we gather massive enough a response to force her back."

"You sound sceptical of our ability to kill her," Hierophant noted, sounding surprise.

My fingers clenched.

"I am," I admitted. "We're good, Zeze. Better than good. But her and the Pilgrim? They have decades of experience and accumulated power on us, and their Gods aren't shy about putting a finger to the scale. Don't think of it as us tumbling Summer again, because against Summer we had levers and rules. We're the green heroes taking a swing at your father and Black, in this story. We get cocky for even a moment and..."

I did not elaborate.

"Heads, pikes, the usual," Masego said. "I shall endeavour prudence."

We stayed in comfortable silence after that, watching the enemy advance.

"I think that I dislike them," he finally said, after a long moment. "These crusaders."

I snorted.

"Well, they *are* at war with us," I said.

The mage shrugged.

"So were Summer and Akua Sahelian, yet I never could must much antipathy," Masego said. "Even towards the Exiled Prince and his mercenaries. They were only creatures acting as their nature demanded, and that is a blameless thing."

"Is it really?" I murmured. "Just because something comes naturally to you doesn't make it right."

"A very Callowan view," Hierophant said. "Your people seek to overlay Creation with a notion of objective morality, which always struck me as rather absurd. If the teachings of any of the Gods were fully correct, Creation would not exist at all. It is, after all, a debate."

"The Gods can say whatever they like," I muttered. "The truest thing Black ever said to me was that, in the end, only we are responsible for our choices. Taking marching orders from Above or Below is just abdicating the rights your own life. The Book of All Things has this lovely little verse about that, you know. Choice. But is it really that if the only two answers are already picked out for you?"

"Free will," Masego smiled. "You always did obsess over that. I'm not certain such a thing can truly exist, Catherine, not in a world that was *created*."

"You're the one who wants to open up Creation to see how it works," I pointed out. "When you were in a fugue, after becoming Hierophant, you said something I still remember. *The godhead is a trick of perspective*."

"I believe it still," he admitted. "Now more than ever, as I have seen what became of you. How Winter's mantle alienated you from mortal existence. To think as a God, I suspect, is to be a God."

"And you'll try to get there," I said. "Seems meaningless, if it's not your choice."

"Perhaps I was simply meant to attempt it," Masego mused. "Because it is my nature to do so."

"Does it really matter?" I asked. "Whether or not that was writ in you from the start. All we can do is act."

"Perhaps not," he murmured. "And so I find myself disliking these crusaders."

"They killed a lot of my men," I said quietly, fingers forming a fist. "And we're only just getting started."

"Death is death," Masego dismissed. "But the way you carry yourself now, as if they put stones on your shoulder? This I hold against them."

I bumped my hip against his side affectionately, then leant against his shoulder. He allowed it without comment, which was as close as he'd ever come to openly returning the affection. I'd never quite get him, would I? How in the same sentence he could display both kindness and utter apathy.

"It's going to be a long war," I whispered.

"And we will win it," Hierophant said with bedrock certainty.

"And what has you so sure of that?"

He laughed quietly.

"Perhaps it is simply my nature," he said. "Go now, Catherine. Go and follow your own."

I moved away. Closing my eyes, I breathed in and out. Seven heroes, huh? Time to see if we could thin that herd a bit.

Opening my eyes, I unsheathed my sword and leapt down.

—

When fighting a group heroic Named, Black had once told me, two manners of adversaries could be found. The first was a proper heroic band. Should that be the case, coordination and weaving of skill should be expected. *Against a band, either dispose of the healer first or place an instantly lethal blow against the leader figure.* That would allow me to either inflict attrition or break coherence. The second kind of adversary was a mere grouping of heroes. No leader, no teamwork beyond the obvious, limited coordination. *Rarer*, my teacher had assessed. *Mostly seen in large scale continental wars or when an overwhelmingly powerful villain emerges, like Triumphant or the Dead King.* I was neither the most dreadful of empresses nor the ancient abomination that lurked within Keter, but here I was anyway. Fighting seven heroes as the host of Procer advanced behind them. They had been ordered to be be prudent, I grasped. Three advanced towards me: one sword and board, the war hammer and the greatsword. Behind them stood the barefoot staff-wielder, and further back

the last two with shields were flanking the healer. *This isn't about power*, I thought. *Power is the crutch of Named. Clarity and skill will win ever time.*

"I don't suppose," I said, "that we'll have a round of introductions?"

The hammer-wielder chuckled.

"What worth are those to the dead?" he replied.

"That," I said, "will make for a *very* ironic tombstone."

I let them strike first. The pair with the large weapons went for the flanks as the shield-bearer slowed to box me in. Eyes on him, I let my senses bloom. No Winter, just the inherent abilities that came with my body being a fucking construct. The mantle would remain inert as long as possible, since I was pretty sure the real reason the Saint and the Pilgrim had yet to show was that they were trying to bait out a Winter trance so I wouldn't think of retreat when they *did* arrive. The hammer went for my legs, and not even a heartbeat later the greatsword whistled towards my torso. Board arcs both, that they could readjust if I went forward. I did not. The thing with large weapons was that, once you'd committed to a blow, there was a heartbeat where it was very difficult to move. Where the muscles were busy dragging that large chunk of steel around. I moved towards the greatsword, adjusting to the arc and ducking under at the last moment. The boy wielding it grunted, shifted his footing and swung backward at the height of my hips. Without missing a beat I slid under, letting a hammer blow pass through the air where I'd been, and in a crouch passed behind the hero as my blade whipped out. His greaves did not cover the back of his leg. I rose smoothly from the slide as he was forced to kneel down, his tendons cleanly cut. Light bloomed inside the wound.

There was a heartbeat where I could have thrust the tip of my sword through the unprotected back of his neck, but I knew better. The sword and board man was already rushing me, shield angled up as he swung his blade. I did not parry, instead throwing myself on the shield and rolling over it, landing behind him. It threw his footing, and when the hammer-wielder tried to whack me I smoothly kicked the back of the the shield-wielder's knee and pushed his back. The hammer struck him in the shoulder, shattering steel like it was chalk. A curse, a scream, but I had more important matters to deal with. The first reserve was about to cut into the dance. The barefoot woman was stalking towards me, centre of mass supernaturally steady as she did. Ugh. Not a caster or a monk, then, a brawler. Wood or not, if that staff hit me I suspected I wouldn't enjoy it. Light bloomed, and the shield-wielder's broken shoulder snapped back into place. Without looking, I could feel all the moving parts. Hammer man was rushing my back, weapon already hoisted. Greatsword boy was going around to my left, warier now that he'd had a taste. And the one with the staff was smiling serenely as she advanced. I spat to the side.

"All right," I said. "Let's have another go."

I waited until sorcery bloomed in the distance to move. A whirlwind of flame erupted around the healer and his bodyguards, though before my view was blocked I saw light flare on the shield of one of the heroes. No kill there,

but it should keep them busy for a bit. Masego was only getting started anyway. Hammer-wielder struck first. I knew the angle of it without looking and half-stepped out of the arc, but the man laughed.

"**Broaden**," he said.

The war hammer tripled in size, and there was no avoiding all of that. My shoulder was clipped and it fucked with my footing, keeping me in place just long enough for the greatsword boy to strike.

"**Pierce**," a woman's voice spoke from behind me.

Power howled. Ah, they were trying to bury me through concentrated might. Shame they'd not trained together sufficiently. It was a tricky thing, to keep myself in the way of both the thrusting staff point and the greatsword until the last moment. A handhold of ice formed just above my free hand I used it to hoist my whole body up, letting the golden-wreathed wooden staff impact the greatsword. It broke like it was made of porcelain, but I didn't get to enjoy that for long. The hammer-wielder was still on my ass, smashing down with his oversized chunk of metal as if the weight hadn't changed along with the size. I dropped the handhold, and the fall bought me a heartbeat as the swing followed me down. It was enough. I rolled to the side as the ground shook and chunks of wet soil went up in the air. The staff-wielder's naked foot caught me in my armoured chin but I felt the godsdamned steel *bend* under the impact as it sent me rolling. Fuck. That was one was dangerous, not because she was more competent but because she was *quicker* and quick was what my survival depended on.

The storm of fire winked out as I got back on my feet, all four heroes in the fray rushing me. A glance told me the healer and his protectors were completely untouched, but a moment later spikes of lightning began hammering down on their position one after another and just like that we were back in business. I watched my enemies approach, their angles and their speeds. Greatsword boy, I noted with amusement, was wielding the remaining half of his weapon like some sort of oversized cleaver. He didn't look all that happy about it. I circled slightly to the right, putting the hammer man between myself and the staff-wielder. And that meant... *Ah, there you are.* Sword and board feinted high and I took him up on it. Even as he flicked his blade down towards my throat, I turned my parry into a swing towards the side of his neck. His shield went up, and that killed his field of vision. Greatsword hero had to get close, now that he'd lost his reach, and it was not his specialty. I flicked to the side and caught his extended wrist, twisting his sharply so he was forced to stand in the way of sword and board's attack.

"**Resist**," the boy hissed out.

Light spread across him in the blink of an eye and I dropped him before it could touch my fingers. The other hero's blade bounced off unceremoniously. While the younger one tried to pivot so he was facing me again, I followed his movement smoothly and lunged at sword and board's throat while he withdrew. The shield came to knock away the blade again, but that hadn't been what he

needed to watch out for. My wrist flicked, a knife dropped into my armoured palm and I rammed it through his eye from the open angle. Behind him I heard the hammer-wielder curse, since he didn't have a clear shot at me. Even as the hero I'd knifed dropped and began twitching death throes, my ears flicked. I hastily backpedalled as the staff-wielder leapt over the fight, landing where my shoulders had been a moment before. The wood whipped out, and my hasty parry was poorly angled. It went straight through my guard, denting my plate and tossing me away for the second time. Well, at least one was down and the healer still busy. Unless he could – no, I wasn't even going to finish that thought. I dragged myself upright and smiled at the barefoot woman.

"Round three?" I offered.

Her staff rose. I almost missed it, because it wasn't flashy. It was just a low ripple, a murmur of power. But my senses were no longer a mortal's, so my eyes flicked to the hero I'd killed. At his side knelt an old man in grey robes, who gently took out the knife. He then passed a hand over the bloodied face, murmuring a prayer. The hero's eyes opened and he let out a ragged gasp. There was no longer any wound on his face. The Grey Pilgrim rose to his feet gingerly, and offered me a rueful smile.

"Round three," he agreed.

Chapter 16

Pirouette

> "When the abyss stares back, wave. Offer refreshments. Being impolite to the abyss is never a good idea."
>
> Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

"Oh, *come on*," I complained. "I know I don't have a lot of room to argue about healing, but that knife was tickling the back of his skull. Even I wouldn't walk that off so easily, and my body is basically lies and mirrors."

There was some shuffling from the opposition, either because of the reminder I'd just killed one of their crew or because grievances at how fucking ridiculous their powers were weren't what they'd been expecting. If they'd been waiting for despair, they were out of luck. Not that I was particularly pleased my work had been literally waved away by the Pilgrim, but that the heroes would be almost absurdly hard to put down wasn't exactly a surprise. The Heavens had already thrown their second-raters at me and I'd chewed straight through them over winter. They were done fucking around.

"You could still surrender," the Grey Pilgrim offered.

Instead I sighed and tapped the side of my helmet. The sliver of power was enough to activate the dormant rune.

"Spell formula stable," Masego said. "No divine interference."

"Confirmed resurrection," I said. "Pilgrim's come out to play."

Thief had warned me that last-moment rescues were his specialty so it wasn't coming out of the blue, though after actually landing that blow I'd expected the hero to actually stay down afterwards. At least the first part was going more or less according to plan. Smacking around the greenhorns some had forced one of the real monsters to intervene before I dug a little too deep and Winter took the helm. I almost felt like shivering at the idea of facing the Grey Pilgrim when in a state of mind where monologues felt like a good idea. Akua might have been right that playing it up for Creation added some hurt to the swings, but there was a reason I was wearing *her* as a cloak accessory instead of the other way around.

"Noted," Hierophant replied. "First contingency beginning."

"Skip straight to second," I grunted. "I think we underestimated how much trouble the old man would be."

Which was a Hells of a thing to say, considering we'd planned for him being in the same wheelhouse as Warlock. But if I was reading this right, swinging his miracle dick around wasn't the Pilgrim's game. He was more a metaphorical full hand on the scales than the kind of Named that tossed around burning mountains. *And that's only eight out of twelve accounted for*, I thought. *Saint and at least one mage are still waiting in the wings.*

"Understood," Hierophant said. "Sunrise Final is-"

Power flared, and his words cut out. I glanced at the Grey Pilgrim, whose staff was wreathed in light.

"Rude," I said. "You could have let him finish. Regardless, I'm reconsidering my stance on single combat. Theoretically, if I agree, do I get to pick my opponent?"

I met the stare of the man I'd stabbed and winked on the same side my knife had gone through. He flinched.

"She is temporizing while her ally prepares his strike," the Grey Pilgrim told the other heroes. "Prepare yourselves, children. After that blow is weathered is the moment to strike."

Gods, but I hated fighting smart opponents. Banter would have kept William and his crew busy for a few minutes, at least. It didn't matter, in the end, because I hadn't spent the last year busying myself sorely with the affairs of rule. While they'd been assembling their armies and heroes, I'd been training the Woe. And the one amongst them I'd spent most time on was Masego, hammering in the basics of battle that he'd once ignored in favour of simply smashing everything in sight with sorcery. The first thing I'd taught him? A well-worn adage from Theodosius the Unconquered himself. *Swiftness is the lifeblood of war.* Before the heroes could further prepare, Hierophant struck. Dawn rose from a sun unknown to Creation, the terrible heart of Summer shining down on the cluster of heroes. Even from where I stood, the heat was overwhelming. Wind picked up even as the Named before me winked out of sight, swallowed by scorching light. The Princess of High Noon had been one of our most vicious enemies to deal with, but we had gained much from her defeat: even this pale imitation of her power made mockery of the kind of sorcery we usually called on.

Within the blaze, a star was born. Shining atop the Grey Pilgrim's staff as he stood unruffled, his loose robes untouched by wind or heat.

"As there was first light, there will be last," the old man said. "Under radiant star was the first of mankind born, and it will shine long after our time is past. Transient we, yet unbowed by the passing. I refuse your verdict, usher of mysteries."

With a thunderous clap, the blaze was parted. A corridor opened, leading straight to me, and the heroes rushed down. I rolled my shoulder. Half the

knockout punch was delivered, I was my responsibility to take care of the second half. The barefoot staff-wielder was first across, blindingly fast. Behind came the usual triumvirate: greatsword, war hammer, sword and board. Not the same as before, for the latter. Apparently coming that close to dying had shaken the man, because it was now another. The sorcery came down around me, too close to a ward for comfort. I grimaced. I'd have to suffer through, at least until the time to withdraw came. Stance wide, I raised my guard and waited for the first of the hunting hounds. She thrust high, towards my throat. Batted aside, but she was better with her weapon than I was with mine – a spin was all it took for her to be smashing down at my pauldron. I took it. The steel shattered like clay, but the impact wasn't strong enough to screw with my own blow. It carved a wound across her cheek, narrowly missing the nose. I got in close to sucker punch her belly, but she parried the blow and I was forced to step back to avoid having my ribcage caved in. Light bloomed on her cheek, the healer's work.

It healed nothing.

Masego had fought demons at Second Liesse. One of them had been a demon of Order, what Praesi called a Beast of Hierarchy. Their essence, as I understood it, was a perversion of laws. Hierophant had learned to mimic that, to a a very limited extent. Inside my killing grounds one law had been established: Light had no effect. The barefoot woman withdrew before I could exploit her surprise, damnably well-trained, and then I had to deal with the second wave. Greatsword – what was left of that weapon, anyway – went for the left side. Hammer for the right, the fresh sword and board keeping me boxed in. I almost smiled. They'd had a limited amount of training together and it was showing: that made it the second time they were trying that tactic on me. Last time I'd gone for one of the sides, and they weren't idiots: they were expecting as much. Instead I barrelled forward. The hero's shield bashed forward to keep me in place for the others to hit, but they'd learned the wrong lesson from the last time. It wasn't that I *couldn't* break their formation, just that I hadn't *chosen* to. My armoured fist hit the shield and it dented, the man wielding it crying in pain as it broke his fingers behind it. It was a good opening to slice his throat, but the other two were at my back so there was no time. I ran into him, the two of us falling to the ground as weapons whistled behind me.

Instinct led me to throw myself to the side instead of wrestling on the ground. It saved my life. Summer's dawn had not only been broken by the Pilgrim, it had been wielded: he shaped it into a beam and threw it at me. His aim was perfectly angled, enough that it didn't touch sword and board when he stayed on the ground. Behind me, earth exploded in desiccated chunks. Time was running out: I couldn't engage four heroes *and* the old man simultaneously, that'd just get me killed. I'd have to get aggressive then.

"They damaged the Light," the barefoot woman said in heavily accented Lower Miezan. "Careful."

It was the right move, telling her comrades healing mistakes was no longer an option. It was also the wrong one, because for a heartbeat they were surprised. I shot back towards the boy with the wrecked greatsword, ducking under a swing and catching the wrist. Hammer-wielder would have smacked me away, aiming for my hips, but a flex of the legs had me putting my feet on the boy's chest while the hammer passed under me. For a heartbeat I was vulnerable, and that had the staff-wielder on my ass. *Not quick enough, for once,* I thought. My thighs tightened, and using the boy's own chest as a counterweight I ripped his arm off. There was a spray of blood and an anguished scream as I fell into a roll, the staff smashing down where I'd been a heartbeat before. Left with a bleeding arm wielding the remains of a greatsword in my free hand, I threw it in the hammer-wielder's face before he could aim another strike. He was horrified enough to take a hand off the hammer to push it aside, and that was a mistake. I landed the roll on my feet, angled my stance and smoothly rose. My blade thrust in an upwards diagonal into his throat. He opened his mouth, trying to gurgle out a word – aspect, probably – but I smacked the pommel and the sword went straight through his spine. It was an uglier death than a clean decapitation.

"*Enough*," the Grey Pilgrim said.

He pointed his staff at me and a star came to life. The beam hit a pane of force three heartbeats before it would have incinerated me, both of them exploding deafeningly. Gods bless Hierophant. Sword and board was getting back on his feet, greatsword boy still screaming about his missing arm – seriously, what a wimp, I lost limbs all the time and you didn't hear *me* yelling about it – and staff-wielder was… back on me. Godsdamnit. I threw myself to the side, swiped at her feet and got treated to a kick in the face for it. While I was rocking back she flowed into a thrust at my throat. Ah, experience. She'd gone for that too often, I'd expected it this time. I caught the tip of the staff with my hand, feeling the steel give and the palm bones break, but I kept my grip on it while I slashed at her throat and she tried to withdraw for a parry. Blood spilled on the ground. Two down, though it was anybody's guess for how long.

"**Sever**."

Masego's miracle vanished. So did my sword, my hand up to the wrist and the armour over it. Fuck. I backpedalled hastily as the Saint entered the fray.

"Aspect already?" I said.

My hand formed again, though much slower than it should have. And it remained ice instead of looking like flesh. That was a problem.

"Your little mage's trick was impressive," the Saint of Swords said. "But time to wrap this up, if we want it over before sundown."

The lack of sword was more a problem than the severed limb, ice or not. A flick of the wrist had a knife falling into my palm, but that was rather cold comfort against this particular monster.

"Fine," I said. "I've been thinking on how to beat you anyway, Saint."

The Grey Pilgrim, apparently uninterested in banter, sent another fucking star at me. Hierophant, bless his soul, split it in four and forced it to shoot in four different directions.

"Have you?" the old woman drawled. "This ought to be interesting."

I could not help but notice none of the heroes I'd put down were getting the resurrection treatment. Was it just comprehensive healing at the last moment, then? Too little to go on to be sure.

"One swing," I said. "If you can take that, I'm probably out of luck."

The heroine laughed.

"Well," she grinned. "Give it your best shot."

Ice formed a sword blade out of my knife as I shifted my grip. Steadying my stance, I allowed the power of Winter to gather in me. Motes of blue emanated from my frame. To my surprise, the Saint actually bothered to get into a stance of her own. Huh, she was taking me seriously. That was kind of flattering.

"Welp," I said, and run away.

I legged it as fast as I could, which was very considering my mantle. They really must have taken me for a complete idiot, if they'd thought I'd stick around to fight a crew of heroes *and* the two old beasts. I heard the air howl behind me as the heroine cussed me out in Chantant, leaping onto a platform of shade to get out of the way. I tapped the side of my helmet as I leapt back down, running as fast as I could towards the relative safety of the palisade.

"Masego," I said. "I need you to-"

"*Dodge*," he screamed through the spell.

I threw myself to the side, and idly reflected that the smoking wound in the ground to my left could easily have been my corpse. Lovely.

"Mage lines on her," I continued. "Artillery too. Gods, everything we can throw."

The sharp tang of lightning filled the air as what must have been no less than thirty feet behind me exploded in a screaming storm. I did not look back.

"She just ran *through* that," Hierophant said through the spell, sounding somewhat offended by the notion.

Engaging the heroes far away from the fortifications had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I was perhaps coming to realize it might have been a tactical mistake. The air howled again and I leapt onto an angled platform, immediately leaping onto another to remain above ground. Where there was now a hole. Shit. A handful of Pickler's engines began firing, but I wasn't holding my breath for scorpion bolts stopping that one. I heard the screaming wind of another strike coming my way and shaped a platform, but it was immediately hit by a beam of light. *Fucking Pilgrim*. I had to reach for Winter and slap down half a ton of ice behind me, not that it stopped the Saint for more than a heartbeat. I gave part of my attention to the little bundle in the back of my head that was Zombie, ordering her to take flight and guiding her towards me.

"I'm not hearing her anymore," I said through the link.

"Put wards around her," Masego replied stiffly. "Can't talk, she's cutting them as fast as-"

The spell cut out again. *Fucking Pilgrim*. My damnably short legs devoured the remaining yards as quickly as they could. Seriously, you'd think Winter would have the decency to give me another few inches when rebuilding my body from scratch. Fine. I'd cope. I should get there without – *don't you fucking dare blow it now, Foundling*. Naturally, the Heavens rewarded my hubris by a neat little box of yellow opaque shields appearing around me. No rescue was incoming from my mage lines: the moment those had appeared, I'd felt sorcery bloom in the distance and shoot towards enemy lines. I was regretting the tactical decision of aiming my casters at the enemy's, right about now. I opened the floodgates, let Winter course through my veins and smashed through the shield in front of me the exact samemoment the Saint of Swords scythed through the one at my back.

"Seriously, what does it take to put you down?" I called out.

"*More than you've got*," the old woman hissed.

I was on the move before I even began speaking, but not quite fast enough. I lost my left leg up to my knee before I could dodge, though by the time I came out of a roll it had formed again. Fuck, I was digging into Winter way more than I'd wanted to this early in the fight. We'd have to use our trick as soon as I got back, even if that made it less effective than it could be. I leapt up onto a platform, a beam of light hitting a pane of force that blew them both up again a heartbeat later. I decided then and there Masego was getting a raise. Which shouldn't be hard, considering I wasn't paying him. The Saint carved through the platform, and my other leg that still had armour on it, but I was already in motion and I landed on Zombie's saddle. Awkwardly enough I almost fell, which would have been a very humiliating way to die, but my mount flew up and finally we made it out of the Saint's range. For now, anyway. Already she was cutting the sky to run up that same cut.

"Masego," I said, tapping the side of my helmet. "Get *all our godsdamned mages* to hit the target I'm marking."

There was no reply, because the spell was cut – *fucking Pilgrim* – so I'd have to hope he heard me. Weaving glamour into a glaring red arrow pointing at the Saint even as she moved, I guided Zombie into a sharply angled descent towards the palisade. Darkness formed into an orb above the Saint, and a heartbeat later a smaller beam shot out of it to hit the location I was indicating. To my vocal disgust, she somehow *parried* the fucking darkness. Gods Below, what was it going to take? After scorpions reoriented to fire on her, the Saint finally withdrew. I knew better than to believe that would be for long. She'd be back with the first wave of crusaders, which shouldn't be long. I'd been a little too busy fighting for my life to notice, but enemy archers had gotten close enough to the palisade to begin firing and the infantry wasn't far behind them. Zombie landed at Masego's side and I got off, slapping her rump as thanks for saving my own. She whinnied, which I definitely hadn't told her to do, and

smugly trotted away.

It was telling that, at this point in my life, even my undead horse was sassing me.

"Hey, Zeze," I panted. "We having fun yet?"

"I've contained demons with the Ivory Globe," he replied, panting as well. "*Demons*, Catherine. She just cut out a door and kicked it open."

"Yeah, we're not going to be fighting her head on any time soon," I snorted. "Not unless we have a mountain range at hand to collapse, anyway."

His glass eyes flicked down to my bare feet, the movement visible even through cloth.

"What happened to you boots?"

I gestured vaguely backwards.

"Oh, they're somewhere back there," I said. "Along with what used to be my legs."

He snorted.

"One of those days, is it?" he said.

"Well, at least I don't have to bluff an angel," I mused. "So there's that."

We shared a smile.

"You ever see what happened to the heroes I killed?" I asked.

"They were not resurrected, last I saw," Masego said. "I suspect what the Grey Pilgrim uses is merely a much more powerful version of priestly healing, not true resurrection. Which seems logical, as that is usually the province of purely healer Named."

And the old man definitely wasn't that. His little light show had carried quite the punch. I adjusted my cloak around my shoulders, which did little to hide the fact that I was barefoot in the middle of an active battlefield. The crusaders were bringing ladders to the fore, I saw. If there was ever a time it was now.

"Our turn," I told Masego.

The blind mage smiled, and a whispered incantation had a water-filled bowl appearing in the palm of his hand. He'd not made it, of course. Materializing something even this small would likely kill him. It'd been brought out of a personal dimension, if I had to guess. Within the carved wooden bowl was dark water, the same that could be found within the pools of the Observatory.

"Let's hope this works," I said, glancing at the enemy army. "We're in the shit otherwise."

"The formula is-"he began.

I interrupted him by plunging my hand into the water. I went straight through, but did not reach the bottom of the bowl. My eyes fluttered closed as Masego whispered soothingly in the arcane tongue. Absolute positioning, he'd called this. I could feel my mind... expand. Beyond a perspective a mortal could bear, but I was hardly that anymore was I? One spike of painful clarity after another went through my forehead as I saw them whole. Calernia. Arcadia. The juxtaposition of them.

One end, Masego's voice whispered into my ear.

I knew it well, that place. I'd fought there twice, once against the Duke of Violent Squalls and the second time against the Diabolist. The Fields of Wend. A depthless lake filled with moving glaciers, sprawling as far as my not-eyes could see.

And another, Masego reminded me.

I could see the battlefield before us, from above. The armoured multitudes advancing towards palisades, like toy soldiers on the ground. Devices of wood and metal firing bolts into men, the shining silhouettes advancing with the host. So many of them.

Align, Masego whispered.

And so I did. Gates, I called them, but that was the barest understanding of what they were. There were no words in any tongue I knew to express it, but instinct bridged the gap. In the sky above the army of crusaders, a circle a mile wide opened.

Through it poured a lake atop their heads.

Interlude: Kaleidoscope

> "Spoken like a man I'll have raised from the dead just to execute a second time."
>
> Dread Emperor Malignant III

They'd meant to make a lake, but that was not what Juniper was looking down at. After the flow was cut the currents had slowed to a crawl, then settled, and what had once been a plain was now cold marshlands. Dotted by a handful of glaciers, for now, but eventually those would melt. *Not in time for the battle to be affected*, the Marshal of Callow decided. The massive chunks of ice could be relied on to block field of sight, but they should not be taken as a more than temporary cover. Not with the calibre of Named on the other side. With the sun beginning to set down, the marsh was empty save for shallow waters and corpses or not. Earlier in the day she'd sent the Watch to harass crusaders trying to fish out survivors, but she'd had to call them back when the heroes took the field again. Juniper licked her fangs behind closed lips, the ridge inside her mouth allowing easy access to clean. She'd been told by Aisha that the way it made the mouths of orcs look to human – too broad, too prominent, almost animal-like – was one of the reasons so many of them assumed her people were thoughtless brutes. It was, her old friend had said, an unconscious judgement. The Hellhound did not mind. There'd been many judgements made today, some more harmful than mere human stupidity.

She still remembered the moment she saw the gate open in the sky. The primal awe the sight had shaken her with, that reminder that she was a very small creature in a very large world. That there were entities striding amongst mortals that could flatten them with but a word or a gesture. It'd been difficult to gauge how many Procerans died the moment the water hit them. At least two thousand, she suspected. The gate had not been so high up in the air that gravity would turn it into some divine blow, but the sheer weight of the mass of liquid made that largely irrelevant. A hammer flattened an ant even if you were barely swinging it. All that power, wielded by a shifty sorcerer and barefoot woman who'd murdered a demigod. That'd always been Catherine's walk, hadn't it? The fine line between absurd and terrifying. A single moment and the entire lay of the battle had changed. Proceran advance had immediately

collapsed, thousands fleeing the sweeping tidal wave pointlessly. The died anyway, drowning in armour. Another few thousand were still lying at the bottom of the marsh.

The crusaders had been struck with horror, but there were people on the other side who'd mastered their panic. Within two heartbeats, mage fire and white-hot heavenly flame had erupted in the centre of the cascading waters. Tons of liquid turned to scalding vapour, but the edges had kept pouring down. Slowed but not stopped. When the first glacier went through, it was split in two by the fires and further broken apart by what Juniper was fairly certain had been the Saint of Swords merely swinging her blade. It'd limited the damage caused by the massive ice structures, but then they'd been swept by the current too and began crushing everything in their way. Another two heartbeats and fences of light formed themselves across the portal to keep the water in, as the heavenly flames winked out. It hadn't been enough. They lasted barely a heartbeat before shattering under the weight. From beginning to end, the entire affair lasted for eleven heartbeats.

Then the Grey Pilgrim struck.

It had defied easy description, and not only because anyone looking directly at it went blind in the aftermath. There'd been... a star, perhaps that was the only way to put it. Only instead of a distant radiant light it had been a *knife*. It carved through an edge of the portal, and the whole thing shuddered. Then it went straight through the other side and the sky blew up. A ring of power spread for miles, boiling hot rain falling across the battlefield for the better part of an hour afterwards. The fairy gate was broken, though now there was a strange circle-shaped glimmer above both armies. Juniper had not been pleased, at the time, but neither had she been furious. The gate had not been meant to be kept open for much longer anyway. Her mistake, she now realized, had been thinking in terms of mortal war. Her Warlord's spell had taken the day away from that mould, and price had to be paid for such great power. Especially when that power was broken by a foe. *There is a reason the Carrion Lord does not unleash the Warlock at the beginning of every battle*, she thought. *And now we learn it the hard way.* The exercise of a villain's power always left them vulnerable, and the backlash for this unmaking had been particularly brutal.

Catherine was not dead, they were fairly certain. Juniper had mages drag her out of sight and examine her the moment after she collapsed. But she was unconscious and... dreaming. The orc had been told that the queen's body was now made of the stuff of the fae, but she had not truly grasped what that meant until she watched Catherine Foundling's body shift around like a puzzle box. Square blocs of flesh erupted her chest, short spikes bent bone and muscle in every direction and Juniper had grown nauseous watching her commander's face melt down to the skull and reform with an eerie keening sound. She still felt ill thinking about it. Orcs were flesh and bone, instinct and feeling. There was almost nothing of any of that left in Catherine. What had struck Hierophant

had been subtler. They'd thought him fine at first, as he remained standing where he'd been. Only when he'd not replied to a question had the soldiers noticed that he was perfectly still. No longer even breathing. There was now a permanent rotation of two mages by the man's bedsides weaving spell to mimic what his lungs had ceased doing. His heart still beat, at least. Neither of the two had woken up in the three hours since the Pilgrim had attacked them.

That left the Army of Callow very, very vulnerable.

So far there had been no attempt at a heroic assault, but there was no telling how long that would last. An issue compounded by the fact that none of Juniper's mages could tell her when the two most powerful members of the Woe would wake, if they ever did. The army's fortifications had withstood the waters well at least. The wards held, and the only place the palisade broke was on the left flank when a smaller glacier chunk hit the wall. Mages had been able to keep that contained with shields, enough that the entire battle line didn't flood. It had been rebuilt since. *Was this what you feared, Catherine, when you forbade Bonfire?* Part of Juniper still believed that plan had been the best chance at a winnable war they'd had, but now she was being forced to admit there was more to wars with Named than tactics and strategy. It was a bitter pill to swallow to admit that she'd had a weakness in her thinking, but now that she knew of it she must fix it lest she make mistakes in the future. Juniper spat into the shallow waters filling the ditch before the palisade, then turned around. She was in overall command, now. And there were things to be done, the first of them having a conversation with a woman she despised.

For once, the Thief was easy to find. The thin woman was lounging outside the tent where the remainder of the Woe slumbered uneasily, propped up in a folding chair and sipping at a silver flask. Juniper sniffed out the scent. Brandy. Even her taste in alcohol was shit.

"Marshal," the Thief drawled. "I had a feeling you'd be coming."

And still she drank, Juniper sneered. *Vivienne* might have grown on the Warlord and the rest of the Woe, but the Hellhound had never taken to her and never would. The Thief was the worst parts of her people crammed together in a single arrogant frame. The orc had learned to set aside most the dislike of Callowans she'd been taught as a child, admitting to herself that they were no worse than the Soninke save perhaps for the occasional petty moralizing. But this one, she was a reminder of why it'd taken the orc so long to like Catherine. She was hollow in the bone. Orcs and goblins understood, without ever needing to be taught, that the heart of the world was kin and clan. The Legions had taught Juniper that kin did not necessarily mean blood, or clan her own people, and it was that shared understanding that had brought her close to Aisha – who had, herself, been forced to learn to divorce the loyalties of her childhood from those that were truly deserved. The Taghreb were perhaps the closest thing humans could come to reasonable. They understood tethers. Soninke, like Callowans, had no such loyalty in them. Instead they worshipped at some abstract altar of principle, a mortal-made god of meaninglessness. Climbing the Tower,

saving the Kingdom: there was little difference save in petty details. The years had taught Juniper that though the people might be fools, individuals need not be. That the things she found so disgusting gathered mostly at the top.

But Vivienne Dartwick was the incarnation of everything she despised about Callow.

An admitted thief, one who took but did not contribute. Were she an orc, she'd have ended up in a cooking pot by now. And while she professed high ideals, unlike Catherine she didn't even have the decency to bleed for them. The Thief was not a fighter, only a parasite. Like a tick she had nestled over new warmth when her previous host died. And had made herself useful enough since that she could not simply be carved up and eaten like she so richly deserved. Just looking at her made Juniper want to bare her fangs. The antipathy, she knew, was shared. The occasional contemptuous looks shot behind Catherine's back made that eminently clear, though they were both professional enough that they worked together without trouble. Or had, anyway, when Catherine was awake. Without her between them the Hellhound had a feeling the knives would finally come out.

"War council is to be held," Juniper growled. "You will attend."

The Thief's brow rose, almost mockingly.

"I am not a member of the Army of Callow," she said.

"You're a spymistress," the orc said. "A hoarder of secrets. Now is the time to spit them out."

"I know quite a bit that you don't, Marshal," the wretch agreed with an easy smile. "But little of import to the battle. Which seems, regardless, not in the process of being waged."

Juniper's blood ran hot, but she ground her fangs. She would not be baited so easily.

"We do not know when she will wake up," the Hellhound said.

"Which makes most planning irrelevant," Thief replied. "Without Catherine and Masego, we lack the teeth to go on the offensive. Plan your defence, Marshal. You do not need me standing at your table as a prop displaying your influence to do so."

That the tick would so familiarly refer to people she'd once sought to kill had the orc's fury spiking. She knew hat humans did not have the same understanding of blood feuds, but that insolent girl should be in *pieces*. Already once a traitor, she would turn again. It was only a matter of time.

"So instead of having some use, you'll just sit there and get drunk," Juniper scathingly said. "What a Named you are. I'd get as much use out of a fucking tavern girl."

"Do you often fuck tavern girls, Marshal Juniper?" the woman asked smilingly. "My word, I had no idea. Still, this is a little bawdy for idle conversation don't you think?"

Juniper's fists clenched. Without ever moving, the Named had changed from a lounging wastrel to an amused aristocrat. She was making an *effort* to be be infuriating.

"I will remain here," the Thief said, "and watch over them. If you do not believe there are agents of Malicia in this host, you are a bloody fool. My hours are better spent keeping an eye out for a knife than repeating numbers you already know for an audience of officers."

There was much that Juniper wanted to reply. That having her at the council would allay fears, serve as a display of unity. That a fucking spymistress had no right to gainsay the orders of the Marshal of Callow, especially not on campaign. But there was no point, so she held her tongue. Turning around without another word, she left.

She had a battle to win, with or without help.

—

Rozala slumped into her seat, exhausted beyond belief. Night had only just fallen, but she knew the work would continue through the dark and unto dawn. In the first few hours, when chaos and panic had spread across the host, she'd desperately struggled to restore order. There was a very real chance the crusaders would have routed, if not for the heroes. They'd walked among the soldiers, helping and healing and soothing away fear. The Princess of Aequitan was still sure at least thousand levies would disappear overnight. After the tides stopped and the scalding rain ceased, the reports had begun coming in. Even now it was hard to tell how many had died, over less time than it took to boil a kettle of water. Early estimates were at nine thousand dead and at least half that out of the fight.

Rozala Malanza closed her eyes, and dealt with the truth that she had just commanded the most disastrous military offensive in living memory.

And the battle had begun *so* well. The Heavenly Fences had allowed her to trample nearly a seventh of the enemy army within the first hour, badly crippling the enemy's ranged abilities: without the crossbowmen, the casualties involved in taking the palisades from the Army of Callow would have been greatly lowered. The siege engines would have taken their due, yes, but the Fences would have limited the damage. It would have been a rough affair, no two ways about it, but most definitely a battle she could win. And Rozala had made plans to hit hard and fast enough at least part of the enemy's supplies could be seized before they retreated through a gate. Enough that starvation could be kept at bay at least a sliver of the way to Hedges. Now there was most a mile of frozen marshland between her army and the enemy's, and her men were two days away from beginning to boil grass to have something to fill their stomachs. There was a very real chance she would have to order horses butchered, if it came to that, and she could already heal the other royals howling about their expensive war horses getting the axe to feed mere peasants.

The dark-haired princess shivered. Part of it was that she was still drenched and cold: after the first reports, she'd handed the reins to her officers and gone

with the rank and file to drag survivors and wounded out of the water. It was the least of what she owed for today's debacle. The other princes and princesses and followed suit, even Prince Arnaud who she doubted had ever done a hard day's work in his life. It'd been a given they would, after word spread she'd gone out personally. They couldn't be seen to care less about the soldiers, could they? The thought was uncharitable, but not necessarily untrue. Rozala's mother had always taught her that command was her right, but also her responsibility. A general who spent lives frivolously was just a butcher, and the Malanzas were no such thing. Ambitious, perhaps, but their roots were that of ancient and famous generals. Her distant ancestor Lorenzo Malanza had been the one to conquer the northern half of the Dominion of Levant for First Prince Charles Merovins. His splendid victory at Tartessos was the subject of song to this day. And she had shamed that memory, she thought with a grimace. By her failure, but also the other reason her hands were trembling.

Gods, she'd been so small. And no great beauty either, with that strong nose and those razor-sharp cheekbones. She'd talked like a sloppy commoner, all insults and insinuations where the situation demanded poise. And Rozala had not been able to hold back, trading verbal blow for blow with the same nonchalant woman who had just *dropped half a lake from the sky*. The knowledge of how easily the Black Queen could have killed any of them had the heroes not accompanied the delegation would haunt her thoughts for years to come. What kind of a woman could do something like that, just speak a word and nigh-instantly slaughter thousands? The princess was not unfamiliar with war, but this was... something else. A titan stepping on ants. She did not blame those who would desert in the night. And now she understood the fervour in the First Prince's eyes, when she spoke of the evils in the east. Rozala reached for the bottle of *eau-de-vie* she'd sent for, breaking etiquette by pouring her own cup and downing it in a single gulp. The liquor warmed her enough that she did not send a servant for a blanket. Neither did she change out of the wet clothing, though. Let her visitors remember where she had spent her hours.

The Grey Pilgrim was the first to arrive. Rozala rose to her feet, and bowed with genuine respect. The old Levantine had saved hundreds of lives after personally destroying the Black Queen's weapon, wreathed in Light as he spread warmth and healing wherever he went. The former had been the most important of the two. How many would that have lost to the deathly cold, if not for the pulses of heat?

"Chosen," the princess said. "I am in your debt for your toil. Any boon in my power to grant is yours to claim."

A dangerous thing to offer Named, she knew, but looking at the exhausted old man who looked like was folding into himself Rozala did not hesitate. He had saved lives in her care, and Malanzas did not leave debts unpaid. The Pilgrim looked at her through eyes gone rheumy and clasped her hand with wrinkled fingers.

"You owe me nothing, child," he whispered. "Would that I could have done

more."

"Through winter and summer, my word stands," Rozala formally replied in the old Arlesite oath. "So long as the Heavens watch and Creation withstands."

Whether he ever asked the favour of her or not was irrelevant. She would not allow kindness to go unanswered. The hero smiled sadly.

"This is not the first or last tragedy this war will bring," he said. "Steel yourself, Rozala Malanza. The worst is yet to come."

"A prophecy, Chosen?" Rozala asked.

"An old man's intuition," the Grey Pilgrim said, shaking his head. "Darkness grows. I fear greater evils than Catherine Foundling are yet to come."

The dark-haired princess' blood ran cold. Worse than the monster who'd faced half a dozen Chosen on her own and brought down the sky? She could think of few greater evils in existence, save for the Tower itself and the Kingdom of the Dead. Neither thought was comforting.

"I hear your guidance," Rozala said, bowing her head in thanks.

"May I?" the hero asked.

Uncertain what he meant, the princess nodded in agreement regardless. The glimmer of light was barely visible, but warmth washed over her. Permeated every part of her body, chasing away cold and weariness and fear. Like she was sixteen again, fearless and ready to rise against Hasenbach to avenge her mother.

"It will be a long night," the Pilgrim said, panting lightly.

She helped the elder into a seat afterwards, seeing his legs shake, and broke etiquette again to pour him a glass of liquor and press it into his hand. Chuckling ruefully, the Levantine sipped at it. He made a face.

"Eau-de-vie," he said. "The things you Alamans drink. Ah, what I would not do for a good pear brandy. It always tastes like Alava."

One of the great cities of the Dominion, Rozala recalled, nestled among tall hills. Famous for its orchards and its herds. It had held on a decade longer than the rest of Levant when the Principate invaded, and even after the city was besieged the inhabitants preferred to burn it and flee into the hills rather than live under Proceran rule.

"Your birthplace, Chosen?" she asked, returning to her seat.

"Levante is where I drew my first breath," the old man replied. "But Alava is where I grew ton manhood. It is where I will die as well, if the Heavens ever allow these old bones to rest."

"Creation will be lessened for the loss," the princess said, and to her surprise found she meant every word.

"Creation will go on," the Pilgrim smiled tiredly. "We are never quite so important as we like to think."

She would have enjoyed quiet conversation with the man a while longer, but it was not to be. Prince Amadis Milenan strode into the tent, his embroidered tunic pristine and his hair perfectly coiffed. It was not enough to hide the tightness around his eyes. Behind him was a short man in a leather coat that

went down to his knees, covering loose trousers and shirt of coloured silk. The Rogue Sorcerer, as he called himself. Of the Chosen, it was him Rozala knew best: they had spent long hours together planning the battle and his role in it as leader of the wizards. She had found him genteel and polite, surprisingly so for a man whose Name implied a certain uncouthness. The princess began to rise, but Amadis held out his hand.

"No need," the Prince of Iserre said. "Not after this kind of day."

The princess hid her surprise. She'd half-expected that after today's debacle he would seek to undermine her position with recriminations. He still might, regardless of this unexpected olive branch, so her guard would remain up.

"Princess Malanza," the Rogue Sorcerer greeted her, inclining his head before taking a seat.

"Chosen," she replied, just as courteously.

Amadis let out a long breath after sitting down, a long moment passing before he spoke.

"This was," he said, "not the way we had anticipated this battle would go."

An understatement if there ever was one, Rozala thought. The use of *we* did not escape her attention. Blame was not being put solely on her shoulders.

"The failure was mine," she said anyway.

"We'd prepared for many things, Your Grace," the Rogue quietly said. "But the sky opening up to drop a lake was beyond our predictions. There is no fault in this, save in believing that our opponent would not be so monstrous."

"I agree," Amadis said calmly. "I cast no doubts on your competence, Rozala. Your initial success is proof enough of it. There will be no talk of removing you from command."

The Princess of Aequitan inclined her head in silent thanks. *Did this shake you enough you are taking this seriously Amadis?* she thought. *Or are you simply keeping me at the head of the host to scapegoat if the situation further worsens?* No matter. For now, it was still her battle to fight.

"I must begin, then, with a delicate question," she said. "This… gate. Should we expect another if we attempt a second offensive?"

If so, this campaign was over. Rozala would not throw away half a hundred thousand lives for pride, even if refusing to do so ruined her. They had learned the enemy's trick, but the enemy would have learned theirs as well. There was no guarantee the Pilgrim would twice succeed in breaking the gate. The two Chosen traded glances.

"That is a complicated question," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Against most other villains, I would say that forceful shattering of the gate might actually kill them. The amount of power and involvement in crafting such a thing is staggering, and the break would lead to vicious backlash."

"Yet Catherine Foundling is not merely a villain," the Pilgrim said. "She is a titled Duchess of Winter. Perhaps the last fae of that realm, if I interpret the Augur's words correctly. She is no longer human, in a sense. What would

destroy the likes of the Warlock or the Carrion Lord might not affect her at all. Her nature has grown other."

"We have seen neither the Black Queen nor the Hierophant since the battle," Prince Amadis noted. "To be frank, I was expecting an Imperial offensive while we were in disarray. We might very well have lost the battle if one had followed."

"I'll concede that much," Rozala said. "Yet there might have been other limitations at work. I am no scholar of sorcery, but it occurs to me that such a great blow – even if it had not been shattered – might have incapacitated the two of them for some time. The duration, however, is beyond my ability to theorize. We may very well be facing another gate come morning."

"We'll know it's coming, this time," the Rogue Sorcerer darkly said. "It's not impossible to contain the flow until the gate itself can be broken, though I'll admit it'll be difficult."

The princess put her hands in her lap, resisting the urge to brush back her hair.

"There are too many uncertainties," she said. "I am reluctant to commit to an assault when everyone I send might be drowned. And that is without addressing the difficulties of an assault. Wading through the marshlands will be difficult, and it might be weeks before the soil drinks the water whole. That means having to march around it, and likely splitting the host in two."

"A probing attack come morning, perhaps," Prince Amadis suggested.

Even a probe could see a few thousand men die screaming to find out the answer to a simple question, Rozala thought. The alternative, however, was retreat. Through hostile land, while so low on supplies they were barely worth mentioning at all. The Black Queen had offered to provide food for a march back, but there was no guarantee that offer would still hold after today. And if it did not, the amount of men she'd lose to a small-scale offensive would be a pittance compared to what hunger would kill. That was without even considering the reports that the Duchess Kegan's army was crossing the river far to the north. The numbers there were said to be over ten thousand, and the Deoraithe were infamous for their skill at *la petite guerre*. Harassment and ambushes, without ever giving battle.

"This is not the kind of decision that can be lightly made," the Princess of Aequitan said. "And not without knowing all the facts. I must recommend we send an envoy to their camp to find out if the queen's terms still hold."

Amadis' lips thinned in displeasure.

"Surely you're not suggesting retreat," he said.

"I am reluctant to even consider it," Rozala admitted. "Yet if the Black Queen is unharmed and the terms hold, it may be that we have no other choice. We cannot dally. Time works against us more than they."

"I would accompany your envoy, if you permit," the Grey Pilgrim said, breaking his silence.

He looked half-asleep, even now. The princess kept her scepticism away from her face. Had the Chosen not tried to take the villain's life but a few hours ago? Still, she did not pretend to understand the ways of Named. For their sort, attempted killing might be no great enmity. The Prince of Iserre watched everyone at the table silently, then slowly nodded.

"Envoy will be sent," he agreed. "And to speak with only the Black Queen, so her state may be assessed. Should she prove incapacitated, however. . . "

Princess Rozala grimly smiled.

"Then we will settle the score in full," she said.

Malanzas, after all, did not leave debts unpaid.

Interlude: Kaleidoscope II

> "Fear is the mother of character. Without it we remain children until death."
>
> Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Vivienne had once spent a few days running a shell game in the streets of Southpool, when she'd still been an apprentice under the Guild. It hadn't been about the coin, for she could have made a hundred times the coppers from burgling a single noble house. Her teacher had teased her about it, calling her a petty hustler instead of a thief, but what she'd learned had been well worth a few sardonic comments. Confidence tricks were about sleight of hand, but also about reading the other side. Gauging how much of a taste you had to give them before the fleecing, how much you could squeeze out of them before things got ugly. She'd learned more about diplomacy over those three lazy days than through years of lessons. It was why she'd pressed to be the one sent to speak with the Proceran envoys, that and the undeniable fact that if Marshal Juniper went instead it would be a bloody disaster. The orc had a place as one of the larger cogs in the kingdom's machinery, but she was useless in all matters not military. That the Marshal of Callow seemed under the impression that her judgement off the battlefield should ever be seriously considered was just a mark of the greenskin's arrogance.

A child that screamed 'kill them all and eat them' every time you glanced at them would be about as useful.

Thief had been forced to lean on the open trust Catherine had shown her in the past to be nominated, and the heavy-handedness had won her no friends in the general staff – which essentially ran the camp while Cat slumbered. The usual deference shown to Named by mundane apparently thinned when said Named had been late to join the cause. Callowans listened to her, and her role as spymistress of the kingdom meant she had most everyone's ear, but there were few of her countrymen high up in the ranks save for Grandmaster Talbot. For all that the rank and file of the Army of Callow drew increasingly from her people, the senior officers were still largely from from the three legions Catherine had brought to her banner. Vivienne saw no need to take issue with that. Officers died and retired, and the Legions promoted strictly from within

the ranks. Her countrymen would keep rising up the ladder until 'Army of Callow' was more than a name. Any halfway decent thief knew that patience was as useful a tool as action, and Vivienne was a better thief than most. More importantly, after securing her role she'd had free hand to deal with the envoys as she wished.

First off, there would be no talk of allowing them into the camp. Let them remain outside under their banner with the morning sun pounding down. They'd shown up around Morning Bell, so Vivienne had let them stew outside for another hour. There was no guarantee she would manage to fool the opposition, and the longer they stayed there the better the chances of Catherine or Masego waking up. She'd not dared to let them wait longer than that. If she did, it might be recognized as the temporizing it was. An hour should just be taken as an insult instead of betraying the relative weakness of the Callowan position. She'd gone out alone to meet them, afterwards. Vivienne knew she could master her own body language if she concentrated, but anyone else was a risk. The two men were still standing when she arrived, and discreetly she studied them as she drew near. One was obvious, the wrinkly old man they knew as the Grey Pilgrim. The other was known to her as well, as it turned out. The distinct nose marked him as a relative of Prince Amadis Milenan and the long curly locks were distinctive enough she recognized them from a sketch her Jacks had obtained. Jacques Milenan, a younger cousin to the Prince of Iserre. His mother was... from an Alamans royal line, though she could not recall which one at the moment. The man was supposed to be high in Milenan's council. Which meant they were taking this seriously.

While she'd assessed them, they'd assessed her. The Pilgrim's face was perfectly calm, a mask she suspected he'd worn for so long there had come to be some truth to it. Vivienne knew something of pretending to be someone for long enough the deception grew roots and leaves. Thief swaggered forward, producing her flask and pulling at the brandy inside. She sloppily wiped her mouth after and silently used her aspect to trade the flask for an identical one that was the same drink, only heavily watered. Now she just had to let her breath do the lying, and they'd assume her to be less sober than she truly was. The Wandering Bard had taught her the uses of fooling others into thinking you an incompetent drunk.

"Greetings," the Proceran said, inclining his head. "I am-"

"Jacques Milenan," Thief interrupted lightly. "I know who you are, crusader."

"And you are the Thief," the Pilgrim said calmly.

He was leaning on his staff, Vivienne noted as she approached. Genuine tiredness or a ploy?

"That's me," she chuckled, making sure the breeze carried the smell of brandy.

She drank from the switched flask. The mundane envoy did not quite manage to hide his disdain.

"Request was made to treat with the Black Queen herself," the Pilgrim said.

"That's funny," Thief said. "That you think you're still in a position to make demands, I mean. I was under the impression a fifth of your army got wiped and you were one week away from beginning to dabble with cannibalism."

"Has the queen refused to receive us, then?" the Pilgrim asked.

"Your side sends some spare kinsman and a man who tried to kill her, then expect Catherine to come out to make small talk?" Vivienne snorted. "I thought high-handed arrogance was a Proceran specialty, Pilgrim."

"If you will not treat in good will, there is no need to treat at all," the Milenan said flatly.

She shrugged.

"So walk," she said. "How much good will do you think you've *earned*, princeling? You invade our kingdom, attempt murder of our anointed queen and all the while plan to carve up our lands to dispense as favours. If every last one of you dies drowning, I will not shed a damned tear over it."

The old man's eyes narrowed. Not because of her words, at least not exactly. Because he'd been able to tell she was speaking the truth. He'd not expected a former heroine, if she'd ever truly been that, to say as much. The very reason Vivienne had said it: she needed to confirm whether or not he could still discern truth from lies, and the sentence was incendiary enough it should garner reaction. *Good*. She had confirmed it. *Bad*. He still had the ability, even when visibly tired. That complicated things, not that she'd expected the Heavens to provide relief. She wasn't hanging with a crowd on their good side, nowadays.

"Negotiations with a lieutenant would not be binding," the Pilgrim said.

"I can speak with my queen's authority," Vivienne said, and it was technically true.

She watched the hero closely as she spoke, trying to find out if that would register as lie. She'd never actually said that Catherine had given her mandate today, and in theory it wasn't impossible for the Queen of Callow to grant this particular authority to her one day. The old man's face remained unmoving, but that told her nothing. He was too clever to be caught through a visible tell twice.

"My instructions," Jacques Milenan said, "are to treat with none but the Black Queen herself."

"Black Queen's not coming out for the likes of you," Thief said, another technical truth. "Come back with your cousin or Princess Malanza and the matter will be reconsidered."

If that worked, it might get them through the morning before the enemy realized a game was afoot. If it didn't, well, all they had was suspicions. They had to be wary of a repeat of yesterday.

"This is not how proper diplomacy is conducted," the Proceran stiffly said.

Vivienne toasted him with her flask.

"You'll note my Name is not 'the Diplomat'," she replied, and took another pull.

She could feel the Pilgrim's eyes on her. Searching, measuring.

"Then I would request audience with the queen personally," the old man said.

"Unless you've suddenly gained a principality or right of command over the host, your function here is purely decorative," Thief replied. "As far as I'm concerned you have no right to make that request."

The hero sighed.

"I am willing to provide healing to wounded in exchange for the audience," he said.

"Chosen," the Proceran said. "Surely you cannot be serious."

Thief drank from the flask again so her face would not be visible to read. This... Would Catherine and Masego qualify as wounded? She was not certain they would. And if they didn't, she would be revealing their state for no gain. It would also mean taking the man at his word, which she hesitated to do. She'd ran with William's crew long enough to know some of the more pragmatic heroes had notions about whether promises made to the Enemy needed to be kept. On the other hand, if those two could be healed most of the army's problems went away. That, she decided, was worth the risk. The flask left her lips.

"An oath to the Heavens," she said. "Of my own wording."

"No," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"Fine," she conceded, idly waving her drink. "We can word it together."

"You misunderstand me, child," the old man said. "There will be no healing."

"No audience either, then," she shrugged. "We'll expect an answer within the hour about whether or not Prince Milenan or Princess Malanza will be coming."

"That will not happen either," the Pilgrim said calmly. "You have betrayed yourself."

Vivienne's heartbeat quickened, but she kept her face smiling.

"Have I?" she drawled. "Then, by all means, take another swing. After you're driven back, expect the cost of supplies to rise accordingly."

The old man met her eyes with equanimity.

"You were a heroine, once," he said.

"And just like that, you lost my interest," Thief said. "See you around, gentlemen. I'd recommend your backers check on the state of their coffers before ordering an offensive. My heart would just weep if the price of retreat was destitution."

And with that last lie ringing in the air, she turned and swaggered away. *Shit*. She'd been had. She'd put a good face on it, but on someone like the Grey Pilgrim the odds of it fooling him were depressingly low. Fuck.

Time to see how well they could bluff with an empty hand, then.

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"She will be incapacitated," Tariq said. "Not dead, for the Thief still had hope, but the Black Queen was hurt by the shattering of the gate."

Princess Rozala considered the matter with due seriousness, to his approval. The young woman had been robbed of true morals by her uprising, but her mother had instilled her with a sense of honour and duty that allowed some small sliver of them to remain. She was forgiven this, for the fault was not her own. Children could not help what they were taught. Tariq held great hopes that the horrors of this war and the others to come would allow her to grow into the woman she could have been. It was a small thing, in this sea of darkness, but every speck of light drove back the night. It did not matter that the candle was small or passing, only that it burned. It was good to remember old wisdom, in days like these. The well-worn truths helped bring perspective to it all. Creation was imperfect, and would be until its very last breath. All the Heavens required of their children was to leave it a little brighter than they had found it. *A hundred thousand pebbles make a tower, one piece at a time.*

"Then we resume our offensive," Princess Rozala said quietly. "Gods forgive us all, if we are wrong."

The old man stilled his tongue as the Princess of Aequitan began discussing marching orders, watching the men and women at the table. These four, two princes and two princesses, were the mortal heart of this crusade. Or at least the part of it here in the north. Prince Amadis Milenan held the most sway, and it was to him the First Prince had granted command, but the Iserran had become almost self-effacing since the butchery of yesterday. He deferred to the general of the host in all things, and in him Tariq read both fear and cunning. The possibility of defeat, before thought absurd, had shaken him. Yet he was also subtly inviting Princess Rozala to overstep her authority, to further isolate herself from the other royals of the host by giving unpopular orders. Even now that he had glimpsed the abyss, the man schemed. The rot went deep in this one. *Though we be flawed instruments, we may yet serve greater purpose*, the Pilgrim chided himself. Imperfection was not sin but the very design of the Gods. Salvation without temptation was meaningless. The failure of a man to recognize his weakness should be met with pity and not blame.

The other two royals were smaller flames to these two, he would admit. Princess Adeline of Orne was young in a way that had little to do with age, and still bleeding from her brother's death. He grieved with her for the loss, though he'd not known the man. The wake of his passing was recommendation enough for his nature. The princess sought alliance with Princess Rozala, and Tariq read admiration in Adeline's heart when she gazed at the other woman. There could be friendship forged there, if trust bloomed, and they would both be happier for it. The Pilgrim half-smiled. Perhaps a helping hand could be leant to the matter. The last was Prince Arnaud of Cantal, and what the old man glimpsed there had surprised him. Laurence was a creature of pure instinct, having spent her lifetime blurring the boundary between thought and act, and her intuition was a sharp thing. Yet the Pilgrim had doubted her, when she'd said that one was the most dangerous of the lot. No longer so now that he had gazed within. All that lay there was patience and the utter absence of emotion.

Tariq watched as the man blustered, speaking foolishly of sweeping advance, and how all the others dismissed him in their eyes. Even Prince Amadis, who thought himself the cleverest of them all.

All the others had warmed to Tariq, after Laurence acted as offensively in councils as she could. Offered him trust, treated him as the man of reason holding back the reckless Saint of Swords. All of them save Prince Arnaud of Cantal.

"I trust the Chosen will participate in the assault?" Prince Amadis asked.

Face never betraying that his attention had waned, the Pilgrim nodded.

"I have already spoken with Laurence," he said. "Save for the Rogue Sorcerer and the Forsworn Healer, we will split with the armies and fight with the soldiers."

Queen Catherine had brutalized the children, but not beyond repair. Antoine's arm had been reattached, and another greatsword found for him to wield. With the coming of dawn, Tariq had been able to Forgive the death of Mansurin. The young man, displaying the famous fortitude of the Champion lines, had only been spurred to greater zeal by his stay Above. Little Sidonia, with her laughing eyes and quick wit, would have to remain under shroud of preservation until tomorrow. The Pilgrim still ached at the memory of seeing the young heroes reaped like wheat as he was held back by the Hierophant. He and Laurence had known that the best chance to spare lives was to slay the Black Queen early in the battle, and that to draw her out the children were the one bait she would not refuse. He regretted it still. Resurrection left a scar on the soul, always. No one could be ripped from the embrace of the Gods without finding Creation and faded and brutish place for the rest of their days, even if the memory of the Heavens was withheld. The Pilgrim excused himself as the council ended, paying due courtesies before returning to his own.

He found Laurence standing by the marshlands madness had made, repeatedly taking her sword an inch out of the sheath and sliding it back down. She was uneasy, then. Tariq came to stand by her side but did not speak. She would do so herself, when she was ready.

"I don't like this," the Saint finally said. "Feels wrong."

He did not contradict her. Though Tariq had been granted insights, they were into the souls of mortals. Laurence de Montfort's strength had come differently. Her sword had reached the Heavens, and by touching the divine with steel she had attained a sensitivity to the lay of Creation he had never seen the equal of in all his years. If she was troubled, there was reason for it.

"She may rise," the Pilgrim said. "The shape of it is there. Wounded or unconscious, those she loves besieged, she may return to offer salvation at the darkest hour."

"And that's not a villain's story, Tariq," the woman grunted. "She's hard to predict, and that'll get people killed. You're sure about what you saw?"

The Grey Pilgrim let out a tired breath.

"What Catherine Foundling craves above all is peace," he murmured. "On chosen terms, perhaps, but peace nonetheless."

His heart had broken a little to see it. That even though she had butchered all that she was, the little girl within was still desperately grasping at the light she'd once glimpsed Above.

"She killed thousands," Laurence said. "And she'll kill more, if she squeaks away here. Compassion's not my wheelhouse, but whoever made her into what she is deserves a slow and painful death. She's been twisted. No one sane would ever do what she did to her own soul."

The child herself, the Pilgrim suspected, would be infuriated to hear someone speak of her that way. Her embrace of her own mistakes rivalled any flagellant's.

"It is going to be a long war," Tariq whispered, the weight of the years heavy on his shoulders.

"Longer for us than most," Laurence replied, barking out a laugh. "We'll be part of the five, old friend. You can be sure of it. I already feel the pull."

The Pilgrim looked up at mockingly sunny skies. There would be a time, after the war turned here and the Red Flower Vales broke, where the Heavens would assemble their sharpest blade. The ancient forms would be observed. Five heroes, sent into the breach to quell the howling dark. Young Hanno would lead them, for the Seraphim had shaped him to the duty. As for the faces of the others, they could only guess. That charming young Valiant Champion was likely, as she'd followed the White Knight before. And there would have to be a practitioner. The most powerful of these was the Witch of the Woods, should she survive her confrontation with the Warlock. *And the two of us*, the Pilgrim added silently. *Relics of an age already past, dusted off one last time.* There was always a price to pay, to end the rise of Evil. Tariq hoped it was the two of them instead of young lives cut down before their prime.

"She'll be there too," Tariq said. "She always is."

"Surprised she hasn't dropped in yet," the Saint admitted. "But it doesn't smell like a brewery, and that's fairly telling."

"That worries me as much as your unease," the Pilgrim said. "For if she has not yet appeared. . . "

"The worse is yet to come," Laurence finished. "There's a cheerful thought."

She sighed and stretched her limbs.

"Well, no point putting it off," she said. "Let's go kill some people."

So spoke Saint of Swords. The Regicide, to the Principate. The Smiling Iron, to the Chain of Hunger. The Fool-That-Cut-Nothing, to no one still living.

"Let's put an end to this war," he replied. "Before it gets worse."

So spoke the Grey Pilgrim, whose names were too many to number. Fleetfoot and Patient Hand, the Kindly Stranger and the Peregrine.

Silence followed and legends went to war.

Interlude: Kaleidoscope III

> "The meaning of the exercise of war is the destruction of your foe's ability to wage it. 'Victory' does not exist as an independent entity; it is merely the manifestation of the enemy's defeat."
>
> Extract from 'Considerations on Warfare' by Marshal Grem One-Eye

It would come down to steel and blood. The Thief had failed, not that Juniper held much hope for success. The woman was not as clever a liar as she believed, and the enemy was cunning. Much as she disliked the former heroine, the orc refrained from spending a quarter hour verbally ripping her to pieces. She had more important duties to see to, now that near forty thousand crusaders and their *heroic* hired killers were on the march. Heroes, huh. Much like knights, Juniper had never thought much of them. All a knight could claim to be was a killer on a horse. The rest was pageantry. And heroes, well, the Hellhound had never cared for the smell of hypocrisy. 'The Heavens told me to do it' did not qualify as a valid excuse under Legion regulations, and those were the closest thing to fair laws Creation had ever seen as far as she was concerned.

"She bought us a few hours, at least," Aisha said.

The two of them were alone in the tent, at least until the rest of the general staff arrived. Juniper cast a look at the Taghreb, eyes lingering on soft skin of her bare wrists. Such delicate appearance, for such a dangerous woman. The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands. The orc cleared her throat.

"For all the good it's done," she said. "We're in for a red day."

The olive-skinned Staff Tribune flicked her an amused glance.

"The Fifteenth's eternal motto," she teased.

The orc did not allow the laughter in those bright eyes to distract her.

"We have a choice to make," she growled. "Static or moving."

Princess Malanza was splitting her host in half, roughly fifteen thousand on each side of the marshlands advancing in thick columns. It'd been too much to hope for the crusaders would try going through the water. It didn't take Grem One-Eye to see that'd mean easy targets for Juniper's engines, and Rozala Malanza had already proved she was no fool.

"Legion doctrine dictates retreat to a hardened position, when met with superior force," Aisha said.

Their current position was as hardened as field fortifications could allow, so the traditional call would be remaining behind the palisades and preparing for a hard fight. It meant, though, surrendering the initiative to the enemy. And the Hellhound had been burned playing number games with this foe before. She was wary of a repeat.

"We could have local superiority, if we sent enough men to hit a single column," Juniper said. "And possibly break that side before the other one gets anywhere close."

"Without heroes on the field, it would be risky," the Taghreb said. "With them, it nears wishful thinking."

Her Warlord had picked a fucking bad time to take a nap, that much was undeniable. Were there even half as many heroes, Juniper would not hesitate to strike anyway. Twelve, though, was too many for her tastes. Even if all they did was prop up morale wherever they stood it might be enough to tip the balance. If the Saint of Swords or the Grey Pilgrim happened to be with either army, massacre was the word that came to mind.

"We let them march without contest, and by afternoon we'll be surrounded and up to our neck in Named," Juniper said. "Even if we don't give battle, we have to slow them down."

"We have munitions," Aisha pointed out.

They'd both known that, but the point of this conversation was not her friend pushing for a plan. The back and forth allowed Juniper to sharpen her own thoughts, using Aisha's words as a grindstone.

"There's a thought," the Hellhound mused. "Not as a weapon, but as ground denial. Plaster one flank with goblinfire and hit the other column with our full muster."

"We'd be leaving our camp exposed," the Staff Tribune said. "We risk a wipe if they have a way to cross the marshlands or get around the goblinfire."

"They're leaving their own exposed," Juniper noted. "They've got at most a few thousand soldiers there that're fighting fit. And they're serving as Malanza's strategic reserve. Which means this isn't just testing our defence, she's aiming for a full victory."

"Assuming they know our queen is incapacitated, they might be under the impression they need to hurry before she awakens," Aisha said.

"That has sense," Juniper said. "And if true, it means the enemy is *committed*. They will not withdraw because of losses."

"Malanza's not been shy about trading casualties so far," the Taghreb shrugged. "This is not fresh observation."

Juniper shook her head.

"No," she replied. "It is. If you're right then static defence is not an option. They'll not retreat with sundown no matter how many we kill, just send wave

after wave against the palisades through the night. They're in it to the death, and that means the only way we make it through this is by forcing a retreat."

Aisha's eyes narrowed.

"And the only thing that would make Princess Malanza call one is the risk of a defeat so major her army would not recover from it," the Staff Tribune said.

"Which we can't inflict by force of arms," the Hellhound said. "Or by Named superiority."

That meant the effect had to be obtained indirectly, through strategic means. Juniper licked her chops hungrily. It was a puzzle. One where the slightest misstep would doom her army and likely Callow with it.

Gods, she'd missed this.

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Captain Pierre Dulac squinted into the sun. The Callowans were fucking crazier than he'd thought, because he was looking at a force of at least four thousand. The Brabantine had served in the army of Prince Arnaud for a decade and a half now – loyalty to the principality of one's birth was all well and good, but the Cantalins paid better – and fought in four of the Great War's largest pitched battles. He'd been known to make the boast that he'd killed someone from every principality in Procer, after a few drinks, and for all he knew it might even be true. He had, to put it bluntly, gotten a handle on the waging of war. No fantassin lived long enough to make it to his current rank if they didn't, much less rise to command of a free company as he had. Which was why he was surprised the enemy had abandoned perfectly good palisades and the cover of their war machines to sally out against the column he was the vanguard of. Spitting out the ball of redleaf he'd been sucking on all morning, the captain slowed his march so his second would catch up. Pierre often led from the front when on the march, though he'd gotten old enough he left the sword-waving to younger sorts when battle started.

"Captain," Lieutenant Francesca, better known as Belle, greeted him.

The southerner was a massive beast of a woman, built like an ox and hairy as one. Some Lycaonese fuck had taken off the tip of her nose with a blade at the Battle of Aisne, which only added to the gruesome spectacle that was her. Not a nice woman. She was quick to use the knife and cheated at dice. But the men were fucking terrified of her, and that had uses.

"Tell me my leaves didn't go bad, Belle," he said. "I'm not hallucinating that army, am I?

"I see them," the lieutenant grunted.

"Fuck," Pierre feelingly said. "I was hoping they'd stay holed up and we could trick another company into leading the first wave."

"Callowans," the woman shrugged. "Hicks one and all. You want to send a messenger to the prince to ask for orders?"

The captain grimaced. He'd rather not if he could avoid it. Their column was following the western bank of that creepy magic swamp, from a bird's eye view, and unlike the other army they had no cavalry backing them. Princess

Malanza had gone to command the host with horse, like a good little Arlesite trying to win wars one charge at a time, and that left Prince Arnaud and Princess Adeline sharing command over this column. Pierre didn't know shit about the Princess of Orne, but everyone and their sister knew Prince Arnaud was a proper twat. He was a twat who paid well and on time, so Pierre's company remained in his service, but the fantassin wasn't eager at the notion of following the military wisdom of the Prince of Cantal. Like all princes, he wasn't known to send his retinue into the breach when there were spare fantassins lying around. Better to take a look on their own terms, the captain figured, without any 'inspired' instructions about when they could retreat.

"Rustle up the last ten men who pissed you off, Belle," Pierre Dulac said. "We're going to have a closer look at whatever they're cooking up."

—

Tribune Abigail of Summerholm should have known someone was out to fuck her when she got offered the promotion after Akua's Folly. Sure the pay increase was nice, and word had got around she'd been in the frontlines during both the Arcadian Campaign and Second Liesse – which made it really easy to trick strapping young lads from home into her bed, if they were as dumb as they were pretty. Plenty of those floating around, it was the type that made shit life choices just like her and enrolled in the Army of Callow. On the other hand, she'd been transferred from the command of General Hune to that of General Nauk. The godsdamned Princekiller himself. The orc looked like a torch had eaten half his face, and acted like he was going to eat half Creation to even that out. Of course they'd put her under the command of the one man in the Army of Callow who was guaranteed to be sent over and over again into the worst possible messes. Abigail had bought a sack of leeches in Laure and paid someone to drop them in Tribune Ashan's bedding when no one was looking.

That fucker was the one who'd recommended her for promotion.

Worst of all, her cohort was green as grass. Oh, sure, the Hellhounds had drilled them to collapse and taken everyone through a brutal gauntlet of field manoeuvres and war games. But they'd not looked death in the eye properly until yesterday and this was already beginning to shape into a worst fucking mess than Akua's Folly, which was really saying something. Three thousand dead legionaries within the first hour, because the priests on the other side had found some loophole in the Book of All Things. *See if I ever give alms to the godsdamned House of Light again*, the tribune grimly thought. Could have been her down there, if the Hellhound had decided on different tactics. The Black Queen had seen their priestly fuckery and raised them mass slaughter, which had been good for morale. Until rumours she'd been wounded by the spell began circulating, anyway. Another rumour had immediately started going around that it was a trick and she was baiting the crusaders, but Abigail could recognize the work of the Jacks when she heard it. The Queen of Callow was having her beauty sleep while the enemy marched. *Rank hath its privileges.*

"Tribune," someone spoke from behind her.

Abigail spat and turned to look at Captain Krolem. The orc was standing stiffly, broad arms visibly itching to salute. It'd taken her a while to wean him off that. Fresh meat from the Steppes, this one, passed through a recruiting camp in the Fields and now a proper loyal subject of the crown of Callow. Now that the Tower had forbidden recruitment in Praes, his sort was rarer addition.

"I'm listening," she said. "But if it's the fucking sappers again-"

"It isn't, ma'am," the orc assured her. "Our outer line reports enemy movement."

"So they have eyes," Abigail noted. "Definitely picked the right people for the watch."

"Aside from the column," the orc clarified. "A single tenth of Procerans. Scouts, we believe."

Ah, *shit*. Her cohort was far ahead of where the sappers were plotting whatever Marshal Juniper had sent them here to do, but she had instructions from the Princekiller to stomp hard on any crusaders coming to have a look. General Nauk had made it clear his forces would not be retreating until the sappers were ready, and someone out to kill Abigail had decided it was a great idea for her cohort to be out on the front lines. At least she wasn't the poor bastard whose cohort was stuck next to the creepy murder swamp full of dead people to anchor the flank. Hells of a silver lining.

"Send out a line," she told the captain. "And since I'm in such a giving mood, they can eat whoever they kill."

"Kind of you, ma'am," Krolem replied, sounding absolutely serious.

Of course he was. Tribune Abigail worried her lip and stared at the column in the distance. An hour, maybe, before the enemy was in engagement range. They'd been waiting out here for two. Maybe the Heavens would smile on her for once, and the sappers would be done soon. She looked up at the sunny sky, grimacing.

"Come on, you assholes," she said. "I got to sermons thrice a year, that's gotta count for something."

—

"Only four thousand, Your Graces," Pierre said, bowing again.

He wasn't sure if etiquette required it, but with royals it was always better to be on the safe side. The Princess of Orne had turned out to be young and easy on the eyes, not that he allowed himself to look. That was a good way to end up blinded. Neither she nor Prince Arnaud had bothered to dismount from their horses to receive his report after he was ushered into the presence of greatness. He was pretty sure each horse was worth at least ten times the war chest he'd accumulated after over a decade of soldiering. They were, he grimly thought, probably better fed too. His company had bought food and kept a hidden stash since, because relying on the largesse of princes was a good way to end up starving, but even their own reserves were beginning to run out. The horses, he could not help but notice, looked perfectly healthy. *Better a prince's mount than a peasant, eh?*

"And you did not approach close enough to ascertain what they were doing there," Prince Arnaud of Cantal said, pawing at his wisps of a beard.

The disapproval was clear, as was the implied question of why he had not. Somehow the fantassin doubted that the answer of 'the orcs they sent out looked a little too eager' would earn him much favour here. He cleared his throat.

"As my men and I had already come close enough to see their formation, I judged it more important to return and make sure that knowledge was brought to you," he lied.

It was one thing to kill for Prince Arnaud's silver, another to die for it. The man didn't pay *that* well.

"Prudent," the Princess of Orne said, tone neutral. "And what can you tell us about their formation?"

"They're digging in, Your Grace," Pierre said, bowing again. "There was no reserve, but there were troops detached on their flank to prevent easy encirclement. It looked like they were preparing to fight."

Princess Adeline frowned.

"With four thousand?" she said. "We've more than thrice that number."

The captain had not been addressed directly, and so decided not risk speaking up.

"Were there many mages, Captain?" Prince Arnaud asked him.

"Not on the front lines, Your Grace," Pierre replied. "I cannot speak for further back."

"It seems a rather obvious trap," the Princess of Orne mused.

"They might be a mere sacrifice to slow us down," Prince Arnaud said.

"Or a feint by the Callowans," the other royal said. "Trying to give us pause without any true threat."

"We can simply smash through," Prince Arnaud said lightly. "Why even bother with battle order, against such feeble opposition?"

Pierre winced. Going in half-cocked against the bastard child of the Legions of Terror would get a lot of people killed before numbers won the day. The captain had never fought legionaries before, but he'd heard stories.

"Let us not blunder at this late hour, Arnaud," the Princess of Orne coldly said. "A careful approach is needed. We give battle only when properly arrayed."

"if you insist," Prince Arnaud indifferently said. "Fuss, if you feel the need. The Principate will prevail regardless."

Pierre Dulac silently wondered when they going to remember they had not dismissed him. And, perhaps, if it was time to politely inquire whether the Princess of Orne was still hiring.

—

Princess Rozala Malanza watched the enemy host through her mother's old Baalite eye, the clever arrangement of lenses within the wooden tube allowing her to study in detail even at a distance. Ashurans demanded a fortune for

every single one of these, but the imitations from Nicae were of much shoddier quality. That the Thalassocracy would remain so tight-fisted over a device they had not even invented themselves – it came from across the Tyrian Sea – was typical of that grasping gaggle of merchants and sailors.

"More than twelve thousand," she said.

"They mean to give battle?" Prince Amadis frowned. "Would it not have been a superior notion to do so from atop the palisades?"

"Maybe," the Princess of Aequitan hedged. "The Legions of Terror are known for their skill at sieges, but this is the Black Queen's army. They made their reputation on pitched battles."

"Then why even raise them?" the Prince of Iserre murmured.

"Something's changed," Rozala said. "Their general has a plan."

"One would assume," Amadis drily replied. "I don't suppose you could hazard a guess as to the nature of that plan?"

The dark-haired princess frowned. The enemy should have perhaps nineteen thousand soldiers left. Assuming at least two thousand had been left to guard the baggage train, the soldiers in front of them represented around three quarters of the Army of Callow. That left a rough quarter unaccounted for, a fact that was making her uneasy. The enemy could not hope to hold back the other column with those numbers, they'd be encircled and slaughtered to the last. And, to be frank, if defeat in detail was to be attempted it was Adeline's host that should have been the target. Rozala had stripped it of cavalry specifically to tempt such a blunder since the Saint of Swords was with that army.

"They could be attempting to delay us until sundown," Rozala finally said. "To prevent us from encircling their camp, counting on my being reluctant to conduct war after dark."

"You do not sound convinced," the Prince of Iserre observed.

"It would be the first major mistake by their commander," she said. "I was taught it is a rule of war that when a skilled enemy makes an obvious mistake it is no such thing."

"It may no longer be the same commander," Prince Amadis said. "Their Marshal would hold authority, in the Black Queen's absence."

"Juniper of the Red Shields," Rozala muttered. "Hasenbach's reports did not mark her a fool. She is alleged to be one of the finest graduates of their War College."

"A skilled second does not necessarily mean a skilled first," the man replied. "I will not question you in matters of war, but what seems like foolishness might simply be youth and desperation."

She might be young but she's fought just as many battles as the rest of us, the princess thought. Yet the Princess of Aequitan could not remember a single of these where the incipient Black Queen was not holding overall command. It was a plausible explanation that Amadis had offered. Yet she still felt as if she was being invited to make a mistake. It was irksome she could not quite put it into words. It was... an alignment. Rozala knew that dwindling supplies were

forcing her to be aggressive. She'd only risked splitting the host in two because heroes accompanied both halves, and there should be no villains left to fight them. The Wild Hunt might strike unexpectedly, so she'd left soldiers to guard her camp and wounded, but everything else she had to field was on the march. Her armies were moving in strength, but there was a certain fragility to that strength. All of this together was bringing muted dread she could not explain.

"We wait," she finally said. "The other column has orders to signal if they engage the enemy or find their path unobstructed. We will proceed when we receive either."

An hour passed with two armies eyeing each other across the field until sorcery rose into the sky. Three red streams. Princess Adeline was attacking an enemy force.

The choice was out of her hands, then. She could not allow the army before her the possibility of disengaging or reinforcing the other side of the marsh.

—

Watching the streaks of red in the sky from her open tent, Juniper allowed the reports spoke to her to go unanswered. The enemy on the left flank was moving to engage Nauk. The enemy on the right was moving to tie up the army she'd put in front of them. She looked down at the map on the table, the figurines she had set down.

"That," she murmured through her fangs, "was a mistake."

The Hellhound smiled, and in her mind's eye she loosed the arrow.

Interlude: Kaleidoscope IV

> "And so Dread Emperor Irritant addressed the heroes thus: Lo and behold, I fear not your burning Light, for I am already on fire."
>
> Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

Abigail was beginning to reconsider her position on tanning being an acceptable vocation. Sure, the smell was horrible and they made you live outside city walls. Pay wasn't that good, and good luck trying to get anywhere without joining a guild that'd squeeze you on fees. On the other hand, she mused, the average tanner did not usually have to deal with fifteen thousand angry crusaders howling for their blood. *I probably shouldn't have gotten sauced and insulted the entire family before leaving*, she decided. *Now even if I come crawling on my knees they'll make me marry a cousin before taking me back.*

"I just can't do it," Tribune Abigail of Summerholm sighed. "They all look like ferrets."

"Ma'am?" Captain Krolem asked.

"We have to win this one, Captain," she told the orc solemnly. "There's a lot riding on it."

"For the honour of the Black Queen," the orc growled approvingly.

"Yes," Abigail lied. "That is exactly what I meant."

The queen could stab her way to an honourable reputation on her own, as far as the woman was concerned, but telling greenskins shit like that was never good politics. It wasn't quite as bad as someone badmouthing the Carrion Lord – or, as this was known within the Army of Callow, *suicide by stupidity* – but orcs tended to be touchy about Queen Catherine's reputation. She'd had drinks with a Taghreb once who'd explained it to her, and what she'd gotten out of the man was that greenskins had a great big cultural boner for people that were good at killing. And Hells, no one ever said the Black Queen didn't have a talent for that.

"Rotation, Captain Krolem," she said, eyes scanning her frontline. "We're tiring."

The Hellhound had, in her great wisdom, decided that the four thousand men under Nauk Princekiller were enough to kick an entire enemy column in the balls. The tribune wasn't all that fond of the Marshal of Callow, who was

rumoured to eat people who got sloppy with kit maintenance, but she had to concede this wasn't going as fucking horribly wrong as she'd expected when the enemy had advanced. For one, compared to Summer fae and wights the levies were godsdamned pushovers. It was *incredibly* refreshing to fight people that didn't keep attacking after you hacked an arm off. Captain Krolem sounded the whistle around his neck and the twenty soldiers at the front of her cohort withdrew, a fresh line taking their place. The crusaders didn't have fancy manoeuvres like that. When they got tired they just died, thank the Gods. Her eyes flicked to the sides and she grimaced.

The crusaders had wasted the better part of an hour getting in battle formations before attacking, but what had struck her as unnecessary wariness was beginning to pay off. Sure, they were failing to breach the shield wall, but the flank to the west was a problem. General Nauk had left a full kabili of one thousand floating out there to prevent easy flanking, but the crusaders had the numbers to keep going around even after engaging those. The only reason the host hadn't been enveloped yet was... A horn sounded, and Abigail kissed her mailed fist in thanks to the Gods Above. Retreat to the next line, at last. It was the third time the general called for one, and they gave more ground every time. Abigail figured at some point the entire army would just fucking leg it, and it couldn't come soon enough.

"In good order, soldiers," she called out. "Anyone falls out of line and I'll drown them in the marsh myself."

It was going well, she thought. Better than she could have reasonably hoped for.

"NAMED," a legionary called out.

It fucking figured.

—

It was like trying to break a stone with a wooden hammer, Captain Pierre Dulac thought as he strode over the corpses of his fellow fantassins. It left a mark, but the hammer tended to break and considering his company was the hammer of this tortured metaphor this was not a pleasant state of affairs. The Brabantine had heard stories about the Legions of Terror, how they'd swept aside the armies of Callow effortlessly, but he'd always believed them to be exaggerated. They'd had twenty years to swell, after all, and he was not unacquainted with how evenings at taverns made yarns grow ever more vivid. After the first time he'd lost thirty of his finest trying to break through the enemy shield wall, however, he'd had to swallow his old opinions. The heathens fought as hard as the devils they bargained with. Horns sounded in the distance and the Army of Callow moved as a single living creature, retreating at a measured pace as balls of flame bloomed in the sky and began raining down on Proceran lines.

Pierre put his shield over his head and knelt, waiting for the rain to pass. A man to his left was a little too slow to bring up his own shield and sorcerous flame struck his face, searing flesh and muscle in the blink of an eye. The

fantassin squinted. New recruit, he was pretty sure, some Segovian second son who'd enrolled to seek his fortune. The poor fucker should have listened, when his mother told him fortune was a fickle bitch.

"On your feet, men of Procer," a voice rang out.

The captain obeyed before he even realized what he was doing. The man who'd spoke was tall, and his accent in Chantant was heavy with the thick syllables of a native Levantine. Armoured in silver, with a shield polished until it shone like a mirror and a sword that was more radiance than steel, the Chosen could be *felt* even from ten feet away. Like a pulse, a whisper of power bestowed by the Godss.

"The enemy retreats," the hero said. "We must pursue. The Heavens will it."

"The Heavens will it," Pierre replied in a fervent whisper.

He would have formed the wings with his fingers, had he not been holding sword and shield. With the end of the wave of fire, advance towards the retreating legionaries was left unbarred. His company formed ranks and advanced, the Chosen at their head, and they shouted defiance. The humans and greenskins on the other side watched them in silence from behind their shield wall, grimly professional. No levies, these. The difference between soldiers trained and soldiers conscripted had been written across the field today.

"Do not be afraid," the Chosen called out. "Their dark queen is wounded and they stand bereft of her protection. This battle will be won by faith and courage."

"Company, charge," the captain screamed. "Honour to the Wreath!"

Shouts gave answer, the oaths of half a dozen principalities sounding where no banners stood.

"Double pay to anyone who stabs the shiny fucker," a woman's voice called out from the other side.

Pierre blinked, but had not time to spare for surprise as a moment later his shield hit the enemy's. A massive orc, who smashed him back with brute force. The fantassin had not survive the Great War without picking up a few tricks, though. He went low and stabbed up, finding flesh, and the greenskin howled in rage. Squaring up behind his shield the captain let the creature's violent death throes bounce off wood and iron, pushing forward before the legionary behind this one could fill the gap. Along the line his men were like wave hitting a cliff, save for where the Chosen led. Legionaries were smacked down like insolent children, and those that tried to force back the hero found a sliver blur carving through their flesh. The fantassin rocked back as a Callowan went shield to shield with him but dug his feet. Gritting his teeth, he had to retreat when the legionary to that one's right stabbed forward with his sword. Another of his men took his place, and he joined the pressing throng to look for a better opening.

"Scatter," a voice too deep to be human shouted.

Pierre found his gaze moving to the side, attracted by sudden movement where the Chosen was fighting. The legionaries who'd been surrounding the man retreated swiftly, and a moment later lightning struck. The Brabantine's blood quickened and he blinked away the bright light, relieved when he saw the hero stood unmarried with his shield up. Lightning scarred the earth around him. A trail of red went up in the sky above, some sort of munitions, and the captain grimaced. That did not bode well. A spike of flame formed above the Chosen and hammered down at him, but the mirror-like shield shone blindingly and the fire blew back into the sky. The second spike, though, shook the Chosen's stance. The third drove him back. The fourth nailed him into the ground. Pierre hurried towards the grounds, not sure what he could do but knowing he had to try. The fifth spike formed... and went out. Snuffed like a candle. By the Chosen's side a wrinkled old woman stood, glaring up with a sword in hand. The Regicide, Pierre understood with trembling hands. The fantassin hurried and helped the other Chosen back to his feet as the Saint of Swords casually carved through half a dozen legionaries with a single swing.

"What part of *careful advance* did you not understand, kid?" the Regicide said. "This is a battlefield, not your sister's wedding. Going in with your dick out won't get you fucked the fun way."

Pierre would never be so foolish to admit this out loud, but he felt a little cheated that the first sentence he'd heard the Chosen of the Heavens speak involved mention of dicks. It was perhaps less radiantly heroic than he'd expected.

"I apologize for my failure, Honoured Elder," the Chosen still leaning on him gasped.

"Apologize by not forcing me to drag my ass here again," the old woman snorted. "Steady this flank, sorcerers are focusing on the right."

The Saint glanced at Pierre, who blanched, and nodded approvingly at him before moving out in a blur. In the distance, horns sounded again and the legionaries began to retreat. The hole the Chosen had carved into the lines had already reformed seamlessly, and the fantassing let the hero he'd been holding up steady his own footing.

"Again, Captain," the man said. "The Heavens will it."

"The Heavens will it," Captain Pierre Dulac agreed.

—

Well, at least she was still alive. Tribune Abigail rubbed at her left eye again, pretty sure she was going to have to get that looked at by a mage. She'd made the mistake of looking at the fucking hero when he made his pretty little shield shine and she'd had to deal with persistent black spots ever since. General Nauk had finally sounded what should be the last retreat before they got the Hells out of here, so her odds of surviving the day were looking sunny. She'd also gotten through a visit by the Saint of Swords without losing any limbs, which had her in a good mood. Named were like lightning: the odds of them striking at the same place in the battle line twice were pretty low once

they left. She'd lost a quarter of her cohort when the shiny fucker had led a charge, and not even calling for heavy mage support had gotten rid of the bastard, but they were approaching the low earth slope the sappers had raised and that was probably a good sign. She hoped. It wasn't like tribunes were high up enough the ladder to be in the loop for whatever secret plans were unfolding. The crusaders were pressing on all sides, but the measured pace of the retreat had continued to prevent encirclement.

Still, thank the Gods the enemy didn't have cavalry.

Abigail squinted at the enemy, to her dismay finding out that the hero from earlier was still leading the pursuit. Fuck. She'd really been hoping that would end up being someone else's problem. Her cohort still had two tracers to send up to request mage intervention, but for the heavy stuff the mage lines could only hit one place at a time. If her signal went into the sky and they were already busy, the enemy Named was going to fuck them up.

"At least they don't fly," Abigail mused out loud. "So there's that."

"Ma'am?" Captain Krolem asked.

He tended to do that a lot. It was a little unsettling for an orc his size to turn into an eager page whenever she spoke.

"Keep us at pace, Captain," she said. "I'm just thinking."

"May I ask about what?" the greenskin said.

"Comparing this to the Arcadian Campaign," she said. "Didn't fight much at Five Armies and One, but this is about as bad as Dormer."

The orc looked at her eagerly.

"Is it true you ripped out a fae's throat with your teeth?" he said.

Oh Gods, the rumours kept getting worse.

"I stabbed it," she denied. "Blood just sprayed into my mouth."

Because she'd been screaming at the top of her lungs in terror at the time, then nearly choked to death as the fae kept trying to knife her.

"Drinking the blood of your enemy is an honourable thing," Krolem assured her.

Burning Hells, she'd never get used to orcs. Sometimes they were almost like people, then they said shit like that.

"Eyes on the enemy, Captain," she said, retreating from the line of conversation.

Speaking of retreats, her cohort was nearing the position they'd been ordered to stop at. The beginning of the earthen slope snaking across the field. Abigail glanced at it and frowned. Wasn't high or angled starkly enough to serve as proper field fortifications. What had the sappers been doing? Looking further back, she saw the packs of goblins standing in companies. No longer digging. Was this the sum of the plan, raising a second-rate hill? It was impressively long, sure, but all it meant was that her soldiers were going to be killed with the high ground. Pressing through the ranks to get to her, one of her lieutenants was making her way with an urgent look on her face. Tribune Abigail went to meet her half-way after leaving Krolem in command.

"Ma'am," the dark-haired Callowan saluted.

"Report," she ordered.

She'd sent the officer to have a look at what the goblins were up to, in case it ended up blowing up in her face.

"Tunnels, ma'am," the lieutenant got out. "They dug tunnels."

Abigail frowned.

"To where?"

The lieutenant gestured forward.

"In that direction," she said. "I couldn't tell how far, but at least beyond our position."

The tribune wiped sweat off her brow, though she was pretty sure she'd smudged dirt more than wiped wetness. Tunnels, huh. What for? Her cohort finished falling back in good order moments later, and she got her answer. The ground shook with muted explosions, snaking across the field until a chunk of the battlefield went up in the air. The Callowan almost fell, but caught herself at the last minute. Dirt began to fall like rain maybe a third into the Proceran host, and her brows rose. That would have killed a few hundred, but it wouldn't stop them. It'd dug some kind of trench in the ground, she saw, pretty deep and wide. Not exactly a knock out-blow, though. Then the water from the marshlands began pouring into the trench and Abigail of Summerholm breathed in sharply. *A river*. The Hellhound had dug a river in the middle of an active battlefield, too broad and deep for easy crossing. And now a third of the Proceran host was stuck on the wrong side of it. Horns sounded, but the call was different this time. It'd been on of the first she learned, when going through officer training.

All companies advance.

—

"Left flank, tracer just went up," the human officer said.

General Nauk of the Waxing Moons did not reply, idly chewing on a finger. He'd had one of his aides drag a corpse out of the swamp. Bloated corpse wasn't his favourite, but it beat rations and the water made the flesh easy to tear off the normally tricky finger bones.

"Use the Spikes," Legate Jwahir said. "And keep hammering, the Marshal handed down orders to try a kill on any hero on our side of the river."

Juniper of the Red Shields. The Hellhound. They had been friends once, he thought. He could remember parts of that. Enmity too, but that only to be expected. Nauk was certain he had not been a very good orc, even before Summer burned away most of what he was. Licking the last scrap of flesh and skin off the tip of the finger bone, the general swallowed. Eyes on the battlefield before him, he savoured the taste of meat and blood as he watched Proceran lines waver. The crusader left flank was attempting to salvage the situation by circling around, but he'd put most his heavies in the kabili standing in their way. It had meant more casualties for the regulars under heroic pressure, but that was necessary. He did not have enough men to be able to afford coddling.

"Jwahir," he growled.

"Sir?" the Taghreb answered, turning to him.

"Burn them," he said. "We're not lingering, not with heroes on the prowl."

His legate looked like she wanted to argue, but he stared at her calmly until she flinched and gave the order. Calm came easily, these days. Balance for all the things that did not. The old killing urge was muted, the Red Rage burned away. Instead now he had this vicious spasm of violence never too far from his hands. That and the hollowness, but he had grown used to that. There was satisfaction to be found in his work, as close to pleasure as it got. General Nauk watched as clusters of green flames exploded in the ranks of the crusaders on the wrong side of the river, picking at the flesh between his fangs with the finger bone. The screams were soothing, almost as good as listening to the spasm. He'd keep his troops in place long enough the Procerans could not escape, then pull back to the camp as instructed. Heroes could still bleed them, and if a commander on the other side managed to restore order long enough to start sending soldiers around the river – which only went on for so long, time had forced limits – defeat could still happen. The world shivered.

"Sir," Jwahir said.

"I see it, Legate," he grunted.

A pair of heroes were hacking at the river with great spurts of Light, trying to collapse a ford. He snorted, dimly amused. Might work, but it'd take too long. Even if they didn't get exhausted before the end, the amount of men they'd be able to spare a burning death would be minimal. Dark eyes, one dead and one living, turned to the crusader camp even though it was too far to see. Soon that would go up in flames as well. Special Tribune Robber would be starting fires there, green and otherwise. Nauk felt like she should dislike the goblin, though he hardly remembered why. Something about a woman? Felt childish. And now he was hungry again. His fangs crushed the finger bones and he sucked at the marrow within, swallowing shards with it before licking his chops clean and tossing away the remains. A great ripping sound sounded in the distance, and the orc jolted in surprise. There was a wound in the sky, a woman running on it. Past the enemy lines, past the goblinfire, past his own men. Nauk's brow creased.

"Scry our mages," he ordered the Callowan officer. "The rest of you, go away."

Legate Jwahir's lips thinned.

"Sir-"she began.

Nauk unsheathed his sword.

"Disobeying a superior officer's order had clear consequences, Legate," he said. "The army now goes in full retreat. You hold command until told otherwise."

The woman paled. The orc did not pay much attention as the mage officer placed the scrying bowl in front of him on a tripod and the rest cleared out. His eyes were on the old woman running across the sky. Heading towards him. She

flicked her sword, carving another rippling wound and sliding down until she landed in front of him.

"You'd be the general, then," the Saint of Swords said.

Nauk tapped the flat of his blade against the scrying bowl's edge.

"Spike," he ordered.

Flame hammered down a moment later and the world became a sea of fire as he laughed. Ah, that'd felt good. The impact had knocked him off his feet, but he rose.

"Again," he called out.

The heroine carved apart the flames that bloomed above them both, glaring at him. Another cluster was born and they both went down. Fire licked at his hands and the Princekiller hacked out a cough. She wouldn't die that easily. But neither would he. He'd felt harsher flames than this. Still did, whenever he closed his eyes. Through the smoke a shape burst out, but he was quick enough the cut that would have taken his throat cut through his ruin of a cheek instead. Barely felt it. The old woman eyed him contemptuously, raised her blade once more and then hurriedly backpedalled when a long knife scythed through where her throat had been a heartbeat earlier.

"So," Archer said, blades twirling in her hands in a display of unnecessary dramatics, "Is it me or you've gotten a little crazier?"

Nauk hacked out a laugh.

"Try to get me a slice, will you?" he said. "Never had heroine before."

"That wasn't a no," the woman drawled amusedly.

"You're one of Ranger's," the Saint of Swords interrupted.

"And you're…" Archer began. "Shit, I could have sworn I knew. Sorry, I really wasn't paying attention during that briefing. Catherine was wearing this very flattering tunic and I was hammered like you-"

The heroine struck, but Archer danced around the blow and forced her back with a slash that would have gone across her eyes.

"Go for a walk, Nauk," the brown-skinned woman said, as if she hadn't been interrupted. "I don't think she's happy about your setting her minions on fire. Go figure. Some people just take things too personally."

"Flank meat," General Nauk suggested. "Or cheek. Tender pieces."

"Gross," the Named said, wrinkling her nose. "And I've been stealing goblin bedding for like a month, so I *know* gross."

The orc snorted, and fled to the sound of Archer beginning to expound on the virtue of royal liquor cabinets with breakable locks as the heroine tried to kill her.

—

Princess Rozala clenched her fingers until the knuckled turned white around the reins. They had been so very, very close to utter and complete victory. She'd followed the classics perfectly. A first wave of levies to tire out the enemy infantry, followed by fantassin companies across the line while princely retinues struck at weak points. She'd tied down the enemy cavalry with a portion of her

own, the sent the rest to circle around to hit the back of the Army of Callow while she thinned she extended the line of her left flank. The enemy mages had been more than a match for her priests, but the struggle had occupied the both of them and left her foe with no real check for the Chosen. Who'd torn into the shield wall with remarkable alacrity, constantly forcing the opposing commander to reinforce breaches with fresh troops. Within the first half hour of the battle, victory was in the air. Wherever Named struck, the Army of Callow bled men like a leaking barrel. Then her circling cavalry had struck, and found a thin line of scorpions awaiting them. She'd almost laughed at the sight. The wave of bolts tore bloody swaths, but it could not stop thousands of horseman on the charge.

Then they'd fired again, barely a heartbeat having passed.

The tip of her cavalry wedges disintegrated. Men and horses died like flies as the scorpions damnably *kept firing*. The losses promised to be brutal, but as her horsemen spread out and began to close distance she bit down on her fury and made her peace with the trade. A higher cost than she would have wished, but victory was coming nonetheless. Then the goblins had wheeled out some shoddy-looking slings, and packed munitions began to blow away whole chunks of cavalry. Her people were valiant, many of them hardened veterans from the Great War. It took them sixty heartbeats to break, and what should have been a triumph tipped towards a draw. The Callowan knights, though outnumbered, broke through the cavalry she'd sent against them after an hour of hard fighting. Losses on both sides were... steep. One of the few comforts of the day, that over a third of the enemy's cavalry had died before her own fled the field. Without the Chosen it might very well have been a defeat. The enemy commander turned those vicious scorpions against her fantassins, revealing that in addition to being repeating they could also be swiftly moved by oxen.

Then the Grey Pilgrim had taken the field and radiant light carved through the engines like a heavenly stroke. The enemy commander ordered a retreat soon after and the legionaries withdrew in good orders, bleeding men to heroes and skirmishers they had no answer to. But the knights of Callow threatened to charge them, and Princess Rozala had no choice but to order a temporary withdrawal while she sent some officers to force back steel in the spine of her horse. After another hour she was gathered in good order again, and ready to order another assault. With the scorpions destroyed, her foe would break. The the sky streaked with sorcery across the march, and she learned that the other column was in full retreat. But a half hour later, another signal touched the sky. Her camp had come under attack. Soon after the flames grew tall enough she could see them even from this far out. Princess Rozala had fought a battle, today, against twelve thousand men. She'd slain near a third of that army, at the price of perhaps five thousand dead of her own. Yet if she pressed the assault now, without the other column, she might very well be assaulting a fortified position with numerical inferiority. Gritting her teeth, she ordered a retreat back to camp.

One night. One night of rest in whatever was left of her camp, and then with dawn she would dispose with all strategic subtlety. She would muster her entire host, and hammer at the enemy until they broke.

—

Vivienne woke to the sound of someone pouring wine. She had a knife in hand before her eyes opened, and she was halfway out of her chair when a chuckle gave her pause. Thief stilled her heartbeat, meeting the former Prince of Nightfall's lone good eye. The fae had a cup of wine in hand, sitting at the edge of Catherine's bed. There were four mages in the tent and over thirty of her Jacks outside, yet not a single one of them had raised the alarm. The Callowan eyed the mages, who had neither noticed her waking nor Larat's presence.

"Where have you been?" she croaked out, voice still-half asleep.

The sound broke whatever glamour had kept the mages from noticing what was going on. Their eyes widened in alarm, but Vivienne's hand rose and they shut their mouths.

"Around," the fae drawled.

Instinct warred in the woman. Part of her wanted to dismiss the mages, since this might be a conversation best kept private. Another part of her was very much aware the nonchalant fae could kill her with a flick of the hand and Catherine was not awake to hold his leash. The mages might be her only chance of survival, if the fae felt inclined to violence.

"Every word spoken in this tent is under seal," Thief told the mages, choosing self-preservation with a bitter taste in the mouth.

"Precious," Larat smiled.

"We fought a battle, today," Thief sharply told him.

"And won it, I hear," the fae replied. "Or at least avoided loss, which is victory enough for the likes of you."

"She'll have your hide, for staying out of it," Vivienne said, forcing calm.

"I take no orders from mortals," the fae sneered.

The implication that Catherine was not one of those hung heavy in the air. Thief's lips thinned. It might even be true, to an extent.

"Then why have you reappeared?" she asked.

The one-eyed fae idly set down his cup on the bedside table and rose to his feet.

"Perhaps I've decided to dispose of my shackles," he suggested. "Or merely to hack away at dead wood."

The way he smiled at her when speaking the latter sentence sent a shiver up her spine.

"Doubtful," Thief said. "There's no Hell horrible enough for what would happen to you if you did, and we're both aware of it. That's not the game you're playing."

Larat shrugged languidly, leaning against a dresser.

"Perhaps I am simply waiting," he said.

Vivienne frowned.

"For *what*?" she pressed.

There was a gasp and Thief wheeled about. One of the mages was staring at the bed, where Catherine was... well, her body was no longer shuffling around. The woman flicked a glance at the fae, who was smiling thinly. Amused. After a long moment, the Queen of Callow's eyes opened and she let out a ragged sound. Rising to a sitting position on her bed, she rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Well," Catherine Foundling rasped. "That was a thing."

"Oh thank the Gods," Vivienne whispered.

Then Larat plunged his blade into her throat. Thief froze in utter surprise, but Catherine did not. She slapped the fae across the face, breaking his chin and teeth, and got on her feet. She took out the sword and her throat reformed within a heartbeat. Larat began to get up, but Cat kicked him back down and kept her bare foot on his chest. The fae began to laugh.

"Already?" the Queen of Callow said, and glanced at the mages still in the tent. "Bind him."

She reached for the cup of wine on the bedside table, then after a sigh withdrew the fingers. Thief's fingers clenched.

"*Hold*," she said.

The mages looked at her in surprise.

"And in wickedness doth Evil sow the seeds of its own defeat," Vivienne quoted, meeting Catherine's eyes.

The queen rolled her eyes.

"For barren is the womb, and certain the fall," she replied.

Is was, Thief knew, the correct second half of the verse from the Book of All Things. It was also not the correct answer to this phrase. It should have been the punchline to a truly filthy joke about sailors and holes in the hull she'd learned while a waitress in Laure.

"Hello, Akua," Vivienne said.

The Queen of Callow's face went blank and immediately a long spear of ice formed from her extended hand, the point resting on the sleeping Hierophant's throat.

"None of you," Akua Sahelian said through Catherine's lips, "are to move or make a sound."

The mages went still. Larat was still laughing.

"You won't," Thief said.

"I assure you," Diabolist said, "the survival of this man is of middling import to me."

"You won't," Thief repeated, "for the same reason you didn't drink from that cup. You're still bound by the oaths her body took."

Akua's eyes narrowed and her wrist flexed, but did not otherwise move.

"Clever girl," Catherine's lips said. "She took an oath not to harm any of you."

"Moonlight," Thief said, and the body froze.

Passing a hand through her hair, Vivienne felt her stomach drop. This, she thought, had just gotten a great deal more complicated.

"Bind her," she ordered the mages.

Larat, she noted, was still quietly laughing.

Bonus Chapter: Court II

> "Salvation is ever an act of violence, be it within or without."
>
> Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

The Woe, Brandon Talbot had learned, had some very peculiar oddities. Queen Catherine's disdain for luxuries was infamous – and had made her popular in some quarters, when it'd spread she'd sold off some of the more ostentatious Praesi inheritances to invest the sum in the army – but each of her companions has their... unusual habits. Lady Thief, he knew, could shift from displaying the manners of a noble of the old blood to those of a mocking thug in a heartbeat. And the least said about her tendency to steal for sport the better. The Archer was, by all reports, a dissolute hard-drinking brute. Yet she could also quote the classics in three languages, and seemed to be the only person in the Kingdom of Callow that could hold a conversation with the Hierophant on the subject of sorcery. Brandon would have preferred a life where he'd never heard the Lay of Lothian's Passing strategically quoted to be perverted into a ribald comment about the skills of fair-haired men in bed, but that'd she'd done it in flawless High Miezan was rather impressive. The language was, after all, long dead. The Lord Hierophant was perhaps the least unsettling, in that he reminded Brandon of the stories once told of the Wizards of the West. Absent-minded, prone to discourse few others could understand and blatantly disinterested in anything even remotely connected to statecraft.

He also held conversations while looking at his interlocutors through the back of his head with magical eyes, which was a little less traditional.

Hakram of the Howling Wolves, the Lord Adjutant, had embraced a different sort of oddity. The even-tempered orc was, by objective study, the second most powerful individual in Callow. The queen had made it clear that when he spoke it was with her full authority, and though he lacked an official title besides his Name he had a seat on sessions of the Queen's Council whenever he so wished. He stood higher in the court's hierarchy than either the Governess-General or the Lord Treasurer, and if so inclined could have claimed the traditional luxurious office and rooms of either. Instead, the greenskin passed his hours in the cramped and crooked room that had once belonged to King Robert's personal scribe. Brandon had never once seen the man that the Army

of Callow openly considered the heir-apparent to Catherine Foundling either turn his back to the door or allow his axe to be further than hand's reach. The Grandmaster's allies had been incensed, when they'd first learned that the army would back the orc as heir if anything happened to the Her Majesty. He was, after all, a *greenskin*. And it would have been a lie to say that the Regals had not been attempting to position themselves for ascension should the luck of the battlefield turn against the queen.

Only the fact that the Deadhead had shown no interest in rule and that Anne Kendall was almost as unpalatable an alternative had prevented the situation from escalating. That, and Brandon's harsh and continued reminders that any attempt to remove the orc from power would be met by brutal and unrelenting violence from Her Majesty. The Grandmaster dismissed the thoughts from his mind, schooling his face into serene pleasantness as he bowed to the orc. Hakram Deadhand, after all, outranked him in both military and courtly ranks.

"Grandmaster Talbot," the orc gravelled, shuffling parchments aside. "Take a seat."

The bow had been returned with a simple nod, one that matched the requirements of etiquette under the assumption that the man was of equal standing to sitting members of the Queen's Council. Humility at work, though with an unspoken edge. Brandon claimed the chair across the parchment-covered desk, eyes flicking to the movement as the Adjutant used a paring knife to work on the tip of a quill. The orc had unusual finesse, for one with such large fingers.

"I thank you for the audience, Lord Adjutant," Brandon replied. "I know your duties stretch your hours."

The greenskin's maw flicked open, revealing a swift flash of fangs in what could have either been threat or amusement. The Callowan had not made study enough of orcs to be able to tell, thought perhaps he should. For all that the Regals saw him as the authority on the newborn Foundling dynasty and its greats, that was more a reflection on the little exposure they'd had to the key members of the regime than of his own deep understanding.

"No rest for the wicked," the Adjutant said. "Well. Should we pretend I don't know why you requested this talk, or will we skip the usual song and dance?"

The tone was mild, as if the orc did not care either way. There was no impatience there, Brandon grasped. The Deadhand was perfectly willing to... *indulge* in the demands of their rank, as if they were some children's game. The unspoken dismissal of centuries of established etiquette rankled, but did not surprise. None of the most powerful people in Callow these days had risen to rank by observing the proper niceties. Smoothing away the wrinkle of irritation, Brandon forced a smile.

"I am not opposed to bluntness on occasion," the Callowan aristocrat said. "Campaign has taught me the virtues of it even in civil matters."

The reminder that Brandon Talbot had fought unflinchingly for the queen on fields foreign and domestic both would not be askew, here. Now that the blades had been temporarily sheathed, his Regals were too often treated as the enemy for his tastes. The orc's hairless brows twitched, the thick ridges of skin in movement implying mirth. As expected, the unspoken part had not been lost on him.

"Thief's people will be combing through the court for whoever talked," the Adjutant said. "Catherine was understandably furious that something under seal was leaked."

Brandon kept his face calm, though worry spiked. The Jacks were skilful and thorough: it was only a matter of time until the culprit was found. After that, the only thing awaiting was the noose.

"There would be no need for any of this," the Grandmaster said, "if any of my people were kept appraised of large developments."

"I reminded her as much," the orc bluntly admitted. "But you've also managed to cast into doubt every single appointment your people achieved. The Governess-General was pushing for a general dismissal, and it took me the better part of an hour to get that off the table."

Under the desk, the dark-haired man's fist clenched. He'd warned them, he had. That the moment the Regals became the enemy in Her Majesty's eyes, she would strike thoroughly and without mercy. Having Kendall whispering in her ear would only make her less forgiving. *And we can't even claim that such a measure would result in civil war*, he thought. The Regals were influential, that much was undeniable, but they did not enjoy the kind of support that the Queen's Men or the queen herself did with the lower and merchant classes. Their power was one of tradition and wealth. At court, it made them strong. But no city would rise in rebellion if the Regals were purged from civil appointments, and the threat of gold only held when the other side did not have the men to *take* that gold if they wanted to.

"Your moderating influence is appreciated," the aristocrat stiffly said, inclining his head.

"Don't take it as a sign of approval," the orc said. "Your clique is beginning to overstep. If removing it didn't mean handing over the run of the kingdom to the Queen's Men, I would have let you hang from your own noose."

Brutal but honest. That was the reputation Lord Deadhand had, in matters such as these. While more open to compromise than the rest of the queen's most trusted, the orc's willingness to be diplomatic only went so far. Yet he remained aloof from the partisan politics of the court, and as a voice of reason that made him priceless – as did the fact that he had the queen's ear more than anyone else. Brandon calmed his breathing. He was not insulted by the bluntness, because that bluntness had not been meant an insult: the Adjutant was merely clarifying his position so no confusion would ensue in the following conversation. The Callowan, swallowing years of lessons on the subject of proper behaviour, decided to follow suit. The Woe, it should not be forgot, had been

mostly paupers and vagrants before their rise to power. Their appreciation for directness had deep roots, and could be used.

"It is appreciated regardless," Brandon said. "To be frank, my people have been restless for some time. This planned partition of Liesse is only the droplet threatening to tip the cup. I hope I will not offend by pointing out that the Regals have been thrown scraps from the high table, and then expected to remain docile and quiet for that privilege."

The greenskin's dark eyes studied him silently. As always, the Callowan made an effort not to glance at the hand of bones that was resting atop the desk.

"Then I'll be frank as well," the orc replied, fangs bared for longer than previously before they were hidden behind the lips. "Your people have not proven loyal or useful enough to get the kind of appointments you're pushing for."

"And *Kendall's* are?" Brandon flatly asked.

"No," the Adjutant said. "We're well aware they look to the Governess-General for instructions. But they also know that they'll be tossed out the moment your Regals gain influence, and it's keeping them in line. As a hanging sword, your people have proved usable. But the accompanying agitation is proving more trouble than that lever is worth, and I will not defend unreliable actors."

Which, the aristocrat thought, *you now suspect we might be considering we're willing to have our people pass information under seal.* It was infuriating, because if any of the Regals were on the Queen's Council there would have been no such ploy. As long as Talbot's allies knew they had a voice at the table, they would have been worried about losing accumulated influence by stepping out of line. But they did not have a seat, so more desperate means had to be used to remain relevant. *And using those means disqualifies us in Her Majesty's eyes from having a seat in the first place*. It was a vicious circle, without any obvious solution but allowing what influence the Regals had to wane and hope the queen looked well upon them for it. Certain loss for uncertain gain. It was a solution that, if Brandon was to be honest with himself, he would not even attempt to put forward at a council. Not least because he did not truly believe in it himself.

"If we are removed," the Grandmaster said, "the balance of power in the kingdom collapses."

"Yes," the orc agreed. "And so Catherine told me to report this conversation directly to her, instead of having Hierophant dig through the brains of your allies for a name. This is the part, Brandon Talbot, where you make your case for the continued usefulness of the Regals."

The man's blood ran cold. He'd sought this meeting to arrange for compromise and concessions, but he'd been reading the lay of the land wrong. His people were not the only ones running out of patience. The orc's broad and ugly face was serene, but the warning ran clear. If he reported to the queen that there was nothing salvageable about the situation, it would not be dismissals

that followed. It would be the Jacks taking people in the middle of the night never to be seen again. And Governess-General Anne Kendall would be the sole truly Callowan voice to decide the kingdom's legacy. The roof of his mouth was dry.

"You would lose the Order of Broken Bells," Brandon said.

The orc frowned.

"I presume this is not the threat it sounds like," he said.

The aristocrat shook his head.

"Knights," he said, "do not grow on trees. They are raised through rigorous training. Through learned traditions. And by allowing the existence of families that can afford to equip and support one of their own with the accoutrements of knighthood. Guildsmen and eldermen have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to replace us in this regard."

"A mark in your favour," the Adjutant said. "In the short term. It is not sufficient to make the unruliness of your people a pill sweet enough to swallow."

It took a conscious effort not to react visibly. *Careful now, Brandon. This is the knife's edge.* The Grandmaster knew, without needing to question it, that the Regals were necessary to the kingdom. He simply needed to make the queen see it as he did, and there lay the thorn. *Marriage alliances*? No, that was a dead end. To be worth wedding in the eyes of foreigners his fellows would need titles the queen refused to bestow. And marriage alliances both within Callow and into other nations would form power blocs Her Majesty would frown upon. *Military officers?* It had already been made clear that the Army of Callow was barred to nobility save if it rose through the ranks after enrolling in the lowest ranks – an unacceptable condition to most his allies, who would not tolerate their kin taking orders from Praesi and peasants. *Ties to the House of Light?* This one, he suspected, might even be a mark against them. The queen's dealings with the priests would be much eased if she was the only possible interlocutor. He was going about this the wrong way, Brandon realized. Why were his people *needed*, from the perspective of Her Majesty? From three heartbeats he met the calm stare of the Deadhand, until the answer finally came.

"Ability," he said.

"Talented officials we can't trust or use are more danger than boon," the orc stated flatly.

"Lord Adjutant," Brandon said. "In all of Callow, how many guildsmen and eldermen do you believe are actually literate? Or familiar with more than basic arithmetic?"

"The upper ranks of every major city and holding," the Deadhand said.

"Let us be generous and assume half these individuals can be spared from their current responsibilities for court and civil appointments," the Grandmaster said. "That is a *very* shallow pool."

The orc's eyes narrowed in thought.

"You believe the Queen's Men are running out of competent candidates," he gravelled.

"Education, the sort that is required for the bureaucracy you are raising, is expensive," Brandon said. "The amount of such taught individuals that can be taken from their existing occupations is limited, if you want to avoid harming the kingdom. The only group that can consistently afford to provide these people are the Regals. No one else has the tradition, the learning and the coin. Do you believe it coincidence, that the Praesi purges focused on the nobility? It was not only to quell rebellion. It was to make Callow *dependent* on the Empire for able rule."

"A dependency that needs to be excised if the kingdom is to remain independent," the Adjutant finished mildly. "You are aware, I believe, of Catherine's opinion on rule by right of birth. What you describe could be considered informal return to aristocracy."

"There will always be wealthy men and women," Brandon calmly replied. "This cannot and should not be avoided. Without the ancient privileges of titled nobles checking her actions, the queen maintains supremacy by right of unquestioned appointment and dismissal. What worth is there in robbing yourself of talent for empty antipathy?"

The orc's fangs flicked into view for a heartbeat before being sheathed again.

"Well argued," the Deadhand said.

Brandon inclined his head in thanks, mostly to hide the relief on his face.

"All of this, of course, is contingent on the Regals moderating their actions," the Adjutant added calmly.

The Grandmaster's jaw clenched. He had come seeking concession, and would be leaving forced to promise them instead.

"I understand your worries," Lord Hakram said. "Command without success is a stone around your neck. A promise to you, then: get your house in order, and the partition of Liesse will be a matter reopened to debate."

Brandon met the greenskin's eyes, finding only patience and calculation there.

"It will do," he replied.

Gods, it would have to.

—

Lady Julienne tightened the cloak around her. She'd had to sneak out of her own home in servant's livery with her face hidden, like a sneak thief. It was mortifying, but she was not in a position to refuse instructions when given. She was being held by the throat, and the slightest flick of the wrist could see her neck snapped. The tavern she'd been told to enter had no sign hanging above the door, the sure sign of miserliness and filth awaiting, and the smell of piss wafted from the nearly alley. She'd not even entered and already she was nauseous. The inside was barely better. A disgusting dirt floor lay at the bottom of a single large common room with a wooden counter at the back. A few tables with ramshackle benches took up most of it, with a pair of alcoves

made of hanging cloth flanking each side. Left side, last alcove. That was what the message had said. The aristocrat hurried there, dismayed at the filth her riding boots was being stained with. Within awaited a woman, seated on a seat without even a cushion by a low table that was nothing more than a wheel on likely stolen pavestones. She doubted the owner of this tavern had ever paid taxes in their entire life.

"Should I order a tankard?" the Thief asked, smiling thinly.

"That will not be necessary," Lady Julienne stiffly replied.

She took the seat across, certain she was going to need to have the cloak burned after she returned to her mansion. The Named seemed indifferent to her reply, drinking deeply from a tankard of dark and thick ale. *Disgusting*.

"Business, then," the other woman drawled. "How's your knitting circle coming along?"

The aristocrat frowned, glancing meaningfully at the common room. It was only half full, with perhaps two dozen people pouring trash down their throats, but speaking of private matters in the open was pure foolishness.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about," the Thief said.

"With due respect," Lady Julienne began.

The Named rolled her eyes and sharply whistled. Without a word, every single person in the room rose to their feet and walked out the door. Including the bald, one-eyed man she presumed to be the owner by the looks of the ragged apron he wore. The sight of it had her blood running cold. Not a single one had hesitated, or spoken a word. Even the drinks were still on the table.

"I own everyone in this street, one way or another," the Thief cheerfully said, but her eyes remained cold. "Even you, Julienne Guilford. Now tell me about the Regals."

"I did as you bid," she replied darkly. "Whenever Talbot is elsewhere I encourage Farron to take harder lines, and when we hold council I stand by him whenever it is not suspicious."

"And our dear friend Samuel Farron," the monster said. "He's still intent on his little coup?"

"He still wants to oust Talbot, yes," Lady Julienne said. "His support is not broad enough, but it is growing."

"Good," the Thief nodded. "You're going to continue supporting him. Gather all the hardliners behind him. Every last one, no matter what bribes or cajoling it takes."

"I know what you're doing," the aristocrat hissed. "You're setting him up. Forging a pretext for a purge."

"Come now, don't be absurd," the villain chuckled. "We already have one of those. The moment your clique got their hands on a matter under seal, there was going to be blood. That one is on your heads, not ours."

"This is murder," Lady Julien accused.

"No," the Named replied. "Murder's what I want to ask you about. Tell me about Valerie Hadley."

"Brandon Talbot's steadiest ally in council," the aristocrat said. "She argues for moderation and seeking the queen's favour, as a rule."

"That's interesting," the Thief mused. "Since she's been moving around large sums of gold she shouldn't have without visibly purchasing anything. When Farron went on about having Ratface killed, what was her stance?"

Lady Julienne frowned, scouring her memory.

"She did not speak on the subject of Lord Qara's assassination," she finally said. "It was Grandmaster Talbot that went on a tirade against."

"You're going to pay very close attention to who she talks to," the other woman ordered. "Especially if she'd been in contact with foreigners."

"Half the Queen's Council is foreigners," Lady Julienne sneered.

"That's an interesting hill for you to make a stand on, Julienne," the Thief noted. "If you'd extended that beautiful patriotism to foreign *money*, we might not be having this conversation."

"I didn't know," the aristocrat protested. "They presented themselves as-"

"Guild-certified merchants, I'm well aware," the blue-eyed woman shrugged. "Shame that was a Proceran front, and you ended up both in debt and guilty of high treason. Funny how these things go, isn't it?"

"I am no traitor," Lady Julienne insisted. "My only fault is being fooled."

"One of your several faults was telling Cordelia Hasenbach about the state of the smithies in Vale in great detail," the Thief corrected. "Which allowed her to learn we were funding them, which in turn allowed her to deduce the Tower's been tight-fisted with equipment. Congratulations, you've passed information about the war readiness of the Army of Callow to a nation about to invade us."

The noble *had* thought the terms of her deal with the merchants were perhaps too lenient, and so been compliant when a very reasonable request about information on Vale blacksmiths had come. Her interlocutors were debating opening a smithy of their own, she'd been told. That one mistake was all it had taken for the monsters to take hold of her.

"I erred, perhaps," Lady Julienne darkly said. "But that is a lesser sin in the face of your actions."

"People keep telling me there's only of those," the blue-eye woman drawled. "It's called defeat, allegedly."

The aristocrat's fingers clenched.

"I know who you are, Vivienne Dartwick," Lady Julienne said. "Your house is still respected, in the right circles. You shame it by being the servant of butchery."

The Named drank from her tankard, then lightly set it down.

"You ever gardened, Julienne?" she asked.

Warily, the noblewoman shook her head.

"Neither have I," the Thief mused. "Not the kind of dirt I like to have under my nails. My father, though? He loved it. Wouldn't hear of hiring a gardener, spent hours kneeling in dirt. There was this one tree he loved most of all, a gift from my mother. One morning, I found him in our garden. And to my surprise,

he was taking a hatchet to that tree. I asked him why, and do you know what he told me?"

Lady Julienne shook her head again. The monster smiled.

"Sometimes," the Thief said. "The healthiest thing for a tree is to *prune* it."

Interlude: Kaleidoscope V

> "The final disappointment of heroism is to find that a just war was, in the end, just a war."
>
> Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Ink and parchment would see the day recorded as a victory, but Juniper of the Red Shields knew better. Despite her best efforts, the Army of Callow had reached the threshold where even the slightest losses began to affect combat efficiency. The loss of the crossbowmen on the first day had already crippled the host's ability to wage open battle, but the second day's losses had been a mere hour away from catastrophe. Twenty-two thousand soldiers had come to these plains, and now less than fifteen thousand remained fighting fit. The mage lines had nearly burned themselves out fixing minor injuries, an ugly choice to make. The Hellhound had broken Legion triage doctrine, which emphasised keeping as many legionaries alive as possible, in favour of getting as many men able to fight as possible. The deeply wounded had been allowed to die, or put out of their misery when requested. It burned her, the knowledge that the other side would have no such decision to make. Priests were a larger logistical advantage than she'd believed they would be.

The Marshal of Callow set aside the thought temporarily, though it never strayed far. There were decisions to make tonight in the dark and they would be no more pleasant than those of the day. She entered the tent without a word, the pair of legionaries guarding it saluting as she passed.

"If you're here to cheer me up, you should have left the armour behind," Archer drawled.

The orc did not bother to humour the Named's coarseness with an answer, instead looking her up calmly. Lady Ranger's pupil had done away with the woven scarf that usually covered the lower half of her face, along with the cloak and coat she insisted on wearing even now that spring had come. It bared skin, but despite the other woman's finest attempts at a suggestive pose there was nothing seductive to be found. She was a mass of bruises and cuts, a red scar going up her cheek and across her left eye, through the eyebrow.

"She beat you like a drum," Juniper stated.

Archer's nose wrinkled.

"Got a few shots in myself," she denied. "Pretty sure I broke her shoulder, near the end."

"It will have been fixed within the hour," the Hellhound said. "They have a healer among their Named."

"You asked me to cover Nauk's retreat," the ochre-skinned woman shrugged. "Mission accomplished. Now where's my seraglio of doe-eyed Taghreb beauties and oiled-up Soninke manservants?"

"Lodge a request with my supply tribune," Juniper blandly replied. "I'll have it fast-tracked."

"We are the least decadent Evil side I've ever heard of," Archer whined. "Who does a girl have to stab, to get fresh dates and a fan-waving pretty boy?"

"The Empress, one assumes," the Hellhound grunted. "Will you be able to fight tomorrow?"

"If you're going to use me for my body, you could at least make it enjoyable," the Named snorted.

Engaging with this one, Juniper knew from experience, was akin to giving a stone that initial push down a hill. She let silence do the talking.

"Not confident about taking on the greybeards," Archer admitted. "I could handle a few round with the side-pieces, but the Saint's gotten used to my forms and the best I can manage with the Pilgrim is a shooting war."

The orc's lips pressed tightly, revealing dismay. That limited their options sharply. Already the loss of most of Pickler's repeating scorpions and all of the Spitters had taken a tool out of her available arsenal, but if Archer couldn't even be counted on to check either of the prime threats? It might still be possible to win, if she defended cleverly enough. But even if she did, the ruin inflicted on the other side would be matched by the devastation of her own host. Should the Army of Callow take even another four thousand casualties – a very conservative estimate of minimal losses considering enemy numbers and Named – then it was done for the year as anything but a second-rate defensive force. The recruiting camps in central Callow would continue providing a trickle of freshly-trained companies, but that covered only mainline infantry. Sappers, mages, knights. Neither of these could be so easily replaced, and without them it would be exceedingly difficult for the Army of Callow to handle the numerically superior forces the Tenth Crusade would inevitably send their way.

"Rest up," Juniper finally said. "We'll need you tomorrow."

Archer leaned back in her seat, eyes for a single heartbeat bereft of the usual mocking indolence.

"Hellhound," she said. "The Saint? I might have gotten a handle on her weakness."

The orc paused, meeting the gaze of the Named.

"She never used an aspect," Archer said. "And her cuts, it *looks* like she's tossing them around carelessly but there's always a purpose to it. Either as a deterrent, to allow her to move quickly or to put down an opponent hard before they can fight back."

Juniper chewed over that.

"I've had very few reports of her using the cuts against soldiers," the Hellhound finally said.

"She'd been fighting for over an hour when we scrapped," Archer murmured. "And she never used any of the fancier tricks Catherine mentioned she has up her sleeve. I think she physically *couldn't*."

"She has limited amount of power, then," Juniper deduced.

The other woman shook her head.

"I think she'd old," Archer replied. "And that using tricks and aspects takes a toll on her body. She doesn't fight your boys because, even if she kills a thousand, after that she's emptied her tankard. It's why she's not the tip of the spear, she only comes out to remove problems."

The Marshal of Callow inclined her head in silent thanks. It would not tip the balance of the battle, but it was great contribution nonetheless. So far, the Saint and the Pilgrim had acted as invincible forces of nature wherever they arrived, only ever checked by other Named. Juniper already suspected that the Grey Pilgrim could only intervene when others were threatened – else why only take the field when the repeating scorpions had already struck? – but now there might be a vulnerability to exploit in the other monster as well. The Hellhound offered a simple nod before leaving the tent, mind already returning to the decisions ahead. Which, to her irritation, she would have to consult another before making. The Thief was easy enough to find. It had been hours since she'd first settled in front of the camp fire she now stared into. Juniper claimed a log by her side, displeased she had to share a fire with the likes of this one.

"We need to retreat," the Hellhound bluntly said, eschewing greetings.

"You know we cannot," Thief replied just as bluntly. "If the Principate keeps a foothold on this side of the Whitecaps, there will be no truce to be had."

"There'll be no truce if the Army of Callow is wrecked either," Juniper growled. "Which is the best outcome to be counted on if we fight tomorrow."

"Duchess Kegan-" the other woman began.

"Is half a month away, at the earliest," the orc interrupted. "And not to be relied on if the tide looks like it's turning against us. The Watch contingent in our ranks is a blade that cuts both ways."

"The duchess will not lightly go back on her word," Thief said.

Juniper frowned. The Named spoke as if she knew something the orc did not.

"What are the odds of Malanza following us, if we retreat to Hedges?" the Callowan asked.

"Slim to none," the Hellhound replied. "We just torched their last supplies. They can last a little longer by butchering their horses, but by my count they'll be starving for at least a week before they get to the fortress. They'll know they can't win a battle in that state. If we withdraw, I am certain they'll fall back to Harrow and disband part of the host while sending for supplies."

"Which leaves half of northern Callow occupied," Thief said. "I am no student of strategy, but I can assure you that is a diplomatic and political defeat that will cripple us."

"The moment we get Catherine back, we can link up with the Deoraithe by gate and drive them entirely out of Callow," Juniper replied. "They'd have a few months in the region at most."

"It is still too long," the woman tiredly said. "Depending on the outcome at the Red Flower Vales, the Empress might backstab us during that period. And if public perception is that Catherine cannot defend Callowan borders, much of the crown's support vanishes. Riots, at the very least. Possibly small-scale rebellion. That divides our manpower, and I assure you we will not be allowed to put back the army together after it has been split. No major player save perhaps the Carrion Lord would see our strength preserved as being in their interest."

"If Lord Black wins-" Juniper began.

The Thief spat into the flames.

"Then it is a *certainty* that the Empire will sabotage us," she said. "From Malicia's perspective, a Proceran foothold in the north is a leash on both the Carrion Lord and Callow. Neither can turn against the Wasteland while the kingdom is in danger of falling to the next offensive. She'll want us strong enough we can bleed the crusade, but weak enough we have no negotiating leverage."

"If we fight tomorrow, the army's done for the war," Juniper honestly said. "At most, if we force them to retreat all the way back to Procer, with the Deoraithe backing us we can hold our end of the passage. Any offensive operations became a fantasy until our next three training cycles are done, and that's at least a year. Longer, for sappers, and we drained the pool dry for both mages and knights."

The Thief hesitated.

"Perhaps a partial retreat?" she ventured. "Followed by a counteroffensive when they are unaware."

"Without the gates we don't move nearly as swiftly as before," the orc refused, shaking her head. "I've already considered it. Might soften them up a bit to let them starve, but it won't make enough of a difference with heroes in the ranks. We still bleed too much."

The Callowan brushed back her hair, then grimaced.

"You are telling me that either path has a decent chance of taking us out of the war," she said. "That there are no good choices to make."

"Only bad ones," Juniper agreed. "And among those, there's one we haven't discussed."

The Named stiffened, the fire's flickering light revealing cold fury.

"You can't be serious," she hissed.

"You have a way to shut her down," the Hellhound said, and it wasn't a question.

Thief's eyes grew cold.

"A heavy assumption," she replied.

"I've known Catherine longer than you," Juniper said, baring her fangs. "She didn't even trust her Name, and her mantle is a great deal more dangerous. She would have contingencies in place, and within the Woe you're the only she considers to have a moral compass."

"I will not allow *Akua Sahelian* to walk free," the Thief hissed. "Much less to wage war."

"Then this conversation is over," the Marshal of Callow said unflinchingly. "I refuse to a fight a battle tomorrow in the current circumstances. We'll take our chances with a retreat."

"How could you possibly trust her with any kind of power?" the Callowan said.

"She's a Praesi of the old breed," the Hellhound said. "In front of her is the Tenth Crusade. Blood will tell. Trust has nothing to do with it."

"If she gets loose, she'll turn on us," Thief said. "Without a second thought."

"You have your leash, and we still have Archer," Juniper calmly said. "Sahelian is a coward at heart, and she plays the game according to the old rules. That makes her predictable. She will not make a move unless she is *certain* she can slip the noose."

"The Callowan half of the army would defect, if they ever knew," the woman said.

"If they ever knew," Juniper repeated softly.

She had won the argument and they both knew it.

—

Akua Sahelian wore Catherine's body seemingly without the slightest awkwardness. Sitting with her legs crossed, stripped of anything but a loose tunic, the Diabolist opened her eyes when Vivienne entered the tent. The glow of the wards keeping her contained was the only light there was to be had, weaving strange and moving shadows over the panes of cloth.

"Vivienne," Sahelian smiled with lips not her own. "I'd expected another bell before you came to terms with the necessity. Your perspective has broadened since I last had you studied."

Thief dragged a seat and dropped it in front of the butcher, dropping down into it without even the pretence of elegance. Idly flipping a knife her aspect had dropped into her palm, she watched the Diabolist silently. Were she not uncertain of the effect it would have on Catherine, she would have already ordered Sahelian's soul to be ripped apart piece by piece.

"Think you have it all figured out, do you?" Thief said.

Catherine's body inclined its head with an understated grace its true owner had never quite managed.

"Though your hostility is understandable, it is unnecessary," Diabolist said. "We serve the same mistress, after all."

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

Over a month of late evenings had been spent wording the contingency oaths. Possession by the Diabolist had not been the issue they'd expected – Catherine's fears had been centred around Winter making her lose perspective – but the conditions were cleared by this state of affairs regardless. Thief had reason to genuinely believe Catherine's judgement was impaired by an external factor, which allowed her to call on the first three oaths. Sahelian smiled even as her fingers dug behind her eyeball, ripping it out. Vivienne noted with satisfaction the smile had grown a little stiff during. She could still feel pain, then.

"Try to play me again and I'll have to get inventive," Thief said even as the eye reformed.

"Noted," the Diabolist replied, inclining her head. "You have a use for me, or at least the power this body holds."

"I do," she said. "You're going to kill crusaders."

"A most enjoyable task," Sahelian smiled.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

She waited until the eye had reformed before speaking again.

"That one," she said, "was just because you pissed me off."

The fucking smile never went away.

"I expect there will be heroic opposition," the Diabolist said.

"There should be at least ten left, maybe more," Thief replied. "Most dangerous are the Saint of Swords and the Grey Pilgrim."

The Queen of Callow's body hummed and cocked its head to the side. The gesture was so *Catherine* that Vivienne almost ordered Sahelian to rip out her eye again.

"Not unworthy opponents," Diabolist said. "I will prevail regardless."

"You are not to cause a massacre," Thief said. "After inflicting no more than six thousand casualties, you are to retreat."

Sahelian's smile turned sharp.

"Restraint," she drawled. "How quaint. You miss an opportunity."

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

The Diabolist's breath grew ragged, in the aftermath. She continued speaking anyway.

"You need the crusaders dead," Sahelian said. "Yet you also require Catherine's reputation to be unsullied when negotiating a truce. Allow me, then, to bloody my hands. I will make it clear to the heroes that this her body is not currently her own."

"You don't know shit about the current political situation," Thief said.

"I know you cannot fight a war against Procer while unseating the Empress," the Diabolist said. "What follows is a mere exercise of logic."

We can't negotiate with the heroes if they think Catherine is a sharper than can go off at any time, Vivienne thought. Sahelian had not grown beyond the causes of her failure. She still looked at all the nations of Calernia with the

belief that sooner or later she would war against them all. Peace stretching further than a temporary truce never entered her calculations.

"You will pretend to be Catherine," Thief said. "And stick to the limits I have already outlined. In addition, you may not slay the Grey Pilgrim."

"Even if this body is at risk of permanent destruction?" the Diabolist probed.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye."

This time she flinched, to the Callowan's satisfaction.

"Don't attempt to make a loophole again," Thief said. "Not even then. Flee instead."

Sahelian softly laughed.

"And what," Thief asked, "has you so happy?"

Catherine's dark eyes met her own.

"Do you believe in redemption, Vivienne Dartwick?"

The Callowan shivered.

"There's nothing in you to redeem," Thief said. "You are a thing pretending to be human."

"My people," Akua Sahelian murmured, "do not put much stock in it either. But I have pondered this matter deeply, of late. Perhaps there is some worth to be found in it."

The moment I have a speck of leverage, I will convince Catherine to break any semblance of thought in you, Vivienne thought. *You are too dangerous a loose end to allow, and you should have forever disappeared after Liesse. There is no place left in this world for you.*

"How hard could it be possibly be," the Diabolist mused. "Acting heroically, that is."

Vivienne rose to her feet.

"You will 'awaken' slightly before dawn," she said. "Prepare yourself."

"I look forward to our fruitful alliance, then, my trusted comrade," Sahelian grinned.

The aristocrat clenched her fingers. That wasn't her grin. She had no right to wear it.

"Eclipse," Vivienne said. "Rip out your left eye, seven times in a row."

She left the tent to the sound of muffled screaming.

—

Prince Amadis Milenan had only managed to sleep after drinking half a thimble of poppy brew, and even then he'd woken long before dawn. The trembling in his hands tempted him to indulge a second time during the darkened hours, but his father had always warned him off reliance on medicine. Many a great ruler had been unmade by growing too fond of a particular vice, when age or exhaustion weakened their resolve. He would not follow in that mistake. Instead he sent for inks and parchment, splaying them over his scribing desk and lighting a pair of oil lamps. The lines of the first illustration were botched by the shaking of his fingers, but the longer he forced himself to concentrate on the matter the steadier his hands became. It was a thorny issue to work

these failures seamlessly into the greater design, but he'd had a taste for this sort of diversion since he'd been a boy and when the quill scratched the last of the blue on the parchment he found himself satisfied with the illustration. Not his finest work, but neither would he be ashamed of having it displayed before peers.

He'd sketched a view of Lake Pavin in the traditional Alamans manuscript style, that sprawling expanse of deep blue touching stony shores. He'd done so from memory, drawing on the beautiful summer he'd spent in Cleves as a young man. Having met his wife there had left him with a lingering fondness for the beautiful principality that had occasionally been politically inconvenient. Jonquille still occasionally teased him for being softer on the land of her birth than she was herself, to the amusement of their children. He rather missed her, at the moment. Her discerning judgement and sharp temper, the way she could soother him without ever saying a word. His father had been furious he'd betrothed himself to a girl from a largely insignificant branch family, but never once had Amadis regretted it. He'd paid for the sentimentality in the years that followed, even risked disinheritance in favour of his younger brother, but those were all passing things. The partnership had endured far longer than the grievances. The thought that he might never see her again was a sobering one.

He penned a missive for his wife beneath the illustration, strangely uneasy, and blew on the elegant cursive quoting the couplet by Drunken Berilion he'd botched declaiming at her on their first meeting. She'd recited it back at him properly with laughing eyes, and neither had looked back since. The prince sent for a footman to have it set with the diplomatic correspondence, a mild abuse of prerogative near every royal in the host had indulged in at least once. Even Arnaud, that old sot, liked to write to his bastard son. His worries having ebbed, the Prince of Iserre watched the sun begin to dawn as he ate his frugal breakfast. The most extravagant of his personal foodstuffs he'd had distributed to his men in a gesture of good will, though he'd kept enough there was no risk of either he or his personal household starving. He remained silent as his manservant removed the empty plate, contemplating the coming day. Twice now, his host had waged battle against the Army of Callow. Twice they had been driven back, at great cost. Prince Papenheim's army would be facing that infamous old monster the Black Knight in the Vales, and the costs of that victory would not be slight. That thread woven with his own losses inked a picture he misliked.

The armies of the Dominion would enter the Principate soon enough, a Principate weakened by war. Prince Cordelia might put her faith in the alliances she had bargained for, but an alliance of victors was like a hearth in summer. The diminished and defeated found no friends, only hungry dogs. All of this, unfolding because a handful of children with an army refused to be defeated. No matter. Princess Rozala believed that this day's fighting would end it all, though the price would be heavy. All could be remedied, once victory was attained. Trumpets sounded in the camp, and Amadis raised an eyebrow. It was

not yet dawn, after all. Malanza was displaying unseemly haste. Then they sounded again, urgently, and his blood ran cold. This was not the call to rise.

It was the call to *battle*.

Interlude: Kaleidoscope VI

"You can have the throne when I'm done with it, which will be never."

Dread Emperor Revenant, initiating the First War of the Dead

Rozala had only felt it once before, throughout the whole of her life. That limpid clarity that was perfect understanding, the crystallization of thought and moment into a single flawless shard. She'd been a child, last time, and her mother had kissed her brow before sending her out of the hall. She'd remained alone on the ancient throne of Aequitain, a cup of poison in hand. In that moment, as the oak doors closed behind her, Rozala Malanza had known that she would take Cordelia Hasenbach's head or die trying. Known it in a way deeper than she knew her breath or the flow of her blood, felt that certainty become part of her soul. Now, standing at the centre of a storm of shouting men and bared steel, she learned something else.

She had overestimated her own cleverness.

It was a bitter lesson. She'd learned the ways of war since she'd been a young girl, been taught them so deeply her grasp on the Ebb and the Flow had paid for it. There were perhaps a handful of generals in all of Procer that were finer commanders than her, and all had decades of experience that in time she would come to match. The Iron Prince, she'd fancied, had been the only one who could match her own discernment in matters of battle. And Klaus Papenheim was old, stepping closing to death's threshold every year. As the blue-eyed dead advanced in utter silence, Rozala Malanza realized that the waters of the world were deep and her understanding of them shallow. What had seemed like cleverness days ago might very well cost her this day, this battle, this campaign and perhaps even this crusade.

That the dead would rise was no great surprise. There were reports of the Black Queen having raised them for purpose of war in the past, and though the Army of Callow lacked Wasteland mages it would have been naïve of her to expect complete ignorance of necromancy. And so, even after the Queen of Callow was laid low, Princess Rozala had laid a trap. She'd crafted it carefully, drawing on the knowledge of the Rogue Sorcerer and the Grey Pilgrim. Even if the Black Queen woke, as the Pilgrim had hinted she might should defeat loom tall over the Callowans, Catherine Foundling had limits to the power she

could draw. Great workings such as raising a mile of marshlands' worth of dead would exhaust and weaken her. And so, patiently, she had ordered preparations. Rozala had no lack of priests and Chosen, and if there was one truth to be had about water it was that it could be *blessed*.

It would have been a beautiful counterstroke. The moment the Black Queen invested her power into the dead, heroes and priests would have gathered together to bless it and the touch of holy would have broken both the host of undead and the villain raising them. Two birds taken with the same stone, turning the Enemy's arrogance into just demise. And so when the alarms had rung and the call to battle trumpeted, when she first received report that blue-eyed undead were rising from the marsh to attack the camp she had smiled. She might, after all, have just won the battle. Then the priests and the Chosen sallied out, carving an island of Light by the shore until they could finish their holy blessing, and when the ripple of pale shivered across the surface of the water triumph coursed through her veins.

Until the moment she saw the dead were still advancing, and Rozala Malanza was struck by terrible clarity.

The dead were coming. Thousands of them, leashed to the Black Queen's will. It was possible for her host to successfully defend, even if caught by surprise and still half-asleep. With the Chosen holding the shore until enough soldiers could be assembled, it was possible to weather the storm. Unless the crusaders were forced to defend on two fronts. The Princess of Aequitan swallowed her fear and despair, soothing her mind. It was not yet done. If the Chosen managed to slay the Black Queen, the tide could be turned.

"Gather the men from Orne and Cantal," Princess Rozala barked, her raised voice stilling the chaos. "We are, I believe, about to be attacked by the Army of Callow."

She did not look to the shores, where the Named were gathering. The Pilgrim and the Saint would understand the situation without need for her to send a messenger.

It was as all on their shoulders now.

—

Christophe raised his shield and the undead's blow glanced off the polished silver. The creatures were slow, for all that the Rogue Sorcerer had been astonished by them. The man's insistence that they'd been raised through the pure power of Winter instead of a Damned's fell abilities or even necromancy seemed to make little difference when it came to meeting them on the field. Flicking his wrist, he separated the abomination's head from its body and the corpse dropped to the ground. The blue eyes winked out a moment later and he settled his stance. The wave was at an end, though already more were rising from the tepid waters. The Mirror Knight feared no Evil, yet he misliked the lay of this battle. His fellow Chosen were too few to hold the whole shore, and there were dangers in standing alone against the horde. Kallia had lost an arm to a dead crusader but a half-hour past, the thing clutching at her body

until the munitions within detonated. Goblin devilry, the mark of a degenerate breed. The scuttling greenskins were without honour. The Forsworn Healer had reattached the arm and healed the wound, but the Painted Knife had been shaken. He could not blame her. Unlike him, she'd fought the monster up close. Christophe would never forget the sight of the Black Queen laughingly tearing apart an entire band of heroes almost by herself. She'd ripped out their lives like errant weeds, making a game of their struggle. Antoine, his young Alamans brother-in-arms, was still plagued by nightmares from having his arm torn out and tossed in Mansurin's face as a *distraction*.

Yesterday had been almost worse. Christophe had come within a hair's breadth of death leading the fantassins in their advance, saved only by the intervention of the Regicide. A second time he had felt the Cold Lady's breath on his neck, when the Callowans had plied wicked sorcery and made river where there was once solid ground. He'd been on the wrong side of it, surrounded by the enemy, and prepared for his last stand when death suddenly bloomed in green flames. The impotence of it had been what stung the worst. Men and monsters he could meet sword in hand, but how did one fight *fire*? Soldiers he'd spilled blood with, comrades under the Heavens, had died screaming while the power he'd been bestowed by Above proved useless to save anyone. He was the Mirror Knight, granted his armaments by the spirits of the Old Lake after he passed their harsh trials. His power was the reflection of Evil against Evil, the conception of the snake biting its own tail. Yet he'd crawled away shamefully from the blazing green, fished out of the waters by a soldier after almost drowning in his flight. The Enemy had failed to scar his body, but the remembrance of that shame would leave mark on his soul until he drew his last breath.

Not all had been so lucky that dishonour was the price exacted. Mansurin's second death had taken him beyond even the Grey Pilgrim's reach.

Christophe chased away the thought and let the light of day wash over him. He drew strength from it, from the **Dawn** that was one of his aspects. He rose with the morning sun, tiredness and uncertainty leaking out of his body. The Elfin Dames had shaped him in this, granted him the boon that with every dawn his soul would rise – and never retreat. The Mirror Knight had once been a thin and sickly child, but the passing of the years had made him a warrior beyond mortal capacity. It was a slight thing, but every morning saw him a little stronger. A little faster. A little more enduring. Another decade of this, the Regicide had told him, and he would be beyond even her ability to match. Perfect within and without, as the Heavens meant him to be. His strength reaching its peak and a sliver beyond, he waded into the shallow waters and scattered the marching dead. He scythed limbs and shattered skulls, his silver blade breaking steel and the dead flesh beneath. He retreated only when none were left to stand against him, soiled water dripping from his greaves. The whistle caught him by surprise, and he turned so his helm would allow him sight.

"Mirror," the Vagrant Spear said in broken Tolesian. "We gather. Take head

of queen."

The Arlesite tongue was not his most fluent, but he had made some study of it during his years defending the convent. Sidonia, as the other Chosen insisted they all call her in private, seemed unruffled by the darkness besieging them. Christophe admired this greatly, as she had been returned from the side of the Gods Above for nary an hour. The Pilgrim's power had breathed life back into her still body so recently, yet she returned to their holy struggle without hesitation. The strength of her resolve was worthy of praise. No all the Grey Pilgrim had returned had been so unflinching in their devotion. There was no trace of daze and confusion in her eyes, only certainty, and the Mirror Knight wrestled with the strange thing that was attraction towards a Levantine. Had his vows not forbidden it... He cleared his throat, cheeks flashing with embarassment.

"Are we to leave our fellow crusaders to stem the tide alone?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Great Elder say, battle won only when queen dead," she replied. "Strike strong. Avenge dead."

Reluctantly, the Chosen withdrew. Already crusaders were forming in proper ranks behind him, priests mingling amongst them. Holy flames would not burn as bright as they should against these queer undead, but burn they would regardless. It would have to be enough, until the Black Queen was slain. Christophe saluted the brave soldiers with deep respect, and there was a flicker of guilt within when they responded in kind. He knew this was retreat with purpose, but it still felt wrong to leave them to stand alone. He followed Sidonia, who led him surefooted to the gathering of Chosen further down the shore. The Knight was the last summoned, he saw. The others greeted him, grim but resolute. The Saint of Blades stood apart from the rest, lazily carving through undead without even relying on her Name, while the rest of the Chosen clustered around the Grey Pilgrim.

Some he knew by name, others only by Name. Kallia, face painted in a fresh coat of red as she held her twin knives, stood besides young Antoine. The Blade of Mercy had his greatsword propped up on his shoulder, eyes gleaming white as he drew on the Light to slay his fears. The Forsworn Healer had his eyes closed as he mastered the pain of feeling so many deaths bloom around him. The Silent Guardian, tongue forever stilled by her oaths, kept her shield close even with her sword sheathed. Christophe had shared a shameful escape with her, yesterday, and their eyes met with unspoken understanding. *Never again*. The Myrmidon, garbed in bronze and faith, was sharing quiet words with the Rogue Sorcerer. Often these two kept to themselves, as the Sorcerer was one of the few Chosen that could speak her obscure Free Cities dialect. This was the sum whole of the Chosen of the Heavens in this blighted place. Mansurin and François had been taken by the green fire, never to grace Creation again. Christophe sheathed his blade and formed the wings against his breastplate, commending the souls of the lost to the Gods. They had served unflinchingly to the end, and deserved endless felicity for it on the Other Side.

"Hear me," the Grey Pilgrim said, and a ripple went through all of them.

None dared disobey, when the Peregrine spoke. The Mirror Knight felt a thrum of excitement. When had such a gathering of the Good last taken place? Blessed souls were a rarity in the lands of his birth, and like him often served their purpose in isolation. The Tenth Crusade had gathered them all for greater design, and they would see it through. *The Heavens will it*.

"We go now to make war on the Black Queen," the old man said. "We were twelve, once, but no longer. Do not forget this. As the Heavens protect us, the Gods Below look well upon her – for she serves their purpose, however unwilling. Victory is not assured, for we now venture in her realm of death and ice."

The elder Levantine smiled sadly at them.

"There is no glory in this," he warned them. "Bards may write songs, one day, and chronicles sing your praises, but this is earthly luster. We march in the spirit of sacrifice, to bring light into the dark. Do not look ahead or behind, only to each other. There is no salvation to be found save at the hands your comrades."

Christophe kept himself from frowning. This was far from the exaltation that he had expected, and suspected they all needed.

"Stand with pride, nonetheless," the Pilgrim softly said. "You came here of your own will, proving yourself worthy of all that was bestowed upon you. Much has been demanded, yet nothing is promised but duty fulfilled. Stand proud, children. We are the torch taken into the night, and though our flame is passing today we burn *bright*."

The Mirror Knight shivered. He felt it, just like the others. The eyes of the Heavens on them. That sacred thing that made them who they were. The trance was broken by a cleared throat, to his vexation.

"All right, kids," the Saint of Swords said, idly decapitating another undead. "We're going after the tiger in her own lair, so expect this fight to be a notch above anything you've been in before. This is the third dawn, and she's fresh returned: she will be at her *peak* and out for blood. Guardian, you're to cover Forsworn against anything she tosses out."

The silent woman nodded, edging closer to the healer.

"Myrmidon, you're sticking by Rogue," the Saint added. "If she hits you, buy him time to retreat and hold her in place until we can flank."

The old woman looked upon the rest of them with a hard smile.

"Knife, Vagrant and Blade," she said. "You're our knife. Stay out of it until Tariq gives the signal. As for you, Mirror. . . "

The old woman's grin had Christophe uneasy, though the light of dawn pushed the failing away soon enough.

"You're with me," she said. "We're claiming the first dance."

The Chosen nodded gravely. If he could save the lives of others by enduring pain, there was no real choice to be made. His power had granted him the ability to withstand much.

"Steel yourselves," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It begins."

The old man struck the ground with his staff, and the marsh *parted*.

Standing tall, the Chosen advanced.

—

Kallia's heart grew steadier the longer they walked. The Painted Knife adjusted her stride so would not leave the shorter Vagrant Spear behind, silently hinting the Blade of Mercy should follow suit. The boy was taller than either of them, regardless of his youth. He'd have to be, to lug around that chunk of steel he called a weapon.

"There will be honour to be found today, strife-sister," Sidonia murmured in Lunara when she caught up. "Worthy strife to offer the Blood."

Kallia almost rolled her eyes. *Alavans*. The hill people were a ferocious lot, but they did clutch the old traditions a little too tightly for her tastes. She was from Levante, herself, which was a true great city instead of a remote valley of orchards and cattle fences. No one could deny the people of Alava were great warriors – their city was the home of the Champion's Blood, after all – but Sidonia wasn't someone she'd ever be able to discuss the latest songs from faraway Smyrna with, or even the latest couplets from the Hidden Poets of the old city. Still, she found her mood lifted by her fellow Levantine's eagerness. In times of strife, it was heartening to remember the old ways.

"I'm not of any of the lines, Sidonia," she reminded her comrade. "Either greater or lesser."

The records of the Holy Seljun had shown that there had once been a Knife of Night a century past, who shared purpose with her, yet the man had never had children and so had spawned no lesser line to be added to the families of the Blood. Should Kallia ever have children of her own her line would be added to the rolls, but she had never been hungry for that honour. Only the greater lines won more than empty titles and emptier privileges from being recognized, as was only fitting for the descendants – in Blood or Bestowal – of the five heroes that had founded the Dominion.

"We Spears have timid boasts," the other woman shrugged. "It will be good, to add this strife to our histories. We stand too deep in the shadow of the Champion lines."

Not so deep, Kallia thought, now that Mansurin had been felled. He'd been born to the thinnest of the lesser Champion lines, but he had been descendent in Blood. His death was worthy of grief, but not unexpected. The descendants of the most fruitful of the founders of Levant were many and often Bestowed, but were known to die as often as they were empowered. None of those lines had ever learned fear, or the virtues of retreat in the face of the Enemy. The Painted Knife still felt awe at the remembrance of her meeting with the Valiant Champion, months ago. The woman was no descendant in Blood, but she had inherited the full Bestowal of her line's founder. This was a rare thing, considered omen of great strife. Not, Kallia thought, that there was not even greater rarity ahead. Her eyes lingered on the crooked shoulders of the Grey Pilgrim

as her hand unconsciously reached for the pouch of red paint at her side. She'd almost drawn the Mark of Mercy out of habit. And, she would admit to herself, wonder. The Great Elder was full inheritor in Blood and Bestowal of the ancient Grey Pilgrim that had been the first Seljun of Levant. Royalty beyond royalty, no matter what lesser kin now held the earthly title in Levante. More than that, he'd saved her life. Years ago, when that Spirit if Vengeance –

"Eyes ahead," the Blade of Mercy spoke in Chantant. "We are nearing."

Kallia's mastery of the Proceran tongue was better than Sidonia's, but both understood him perfectly. Her instinct was to move closer to the boy, stand shoulder-to-shoulder against the threat, but she could not – he needed room, to swing around that greatsword of his. The Painted Knife flicked a careful glance at the walls of water flanking them on both sides. After the Saint of Swords dispatched the first few undead to wander out effortlessly, the probing assaults had ceased. Their march had been unhindered; the path of mud they strode across leading to a tall glacier ahead. The Levantine stared at the mass of ice, still unused to the sight. These lands were strange ones. She had never seen snow nor ice before crossing the Stairway and glimpsing the tall peaks of the Parish, but now she had seen too much of it for her tastes. All the Bestowed grew tense when the enemy came within sight, save for the Great Elder and the Saint. It settled Kallia's nerves some to see them so calm. They were a mighty pair, no lesser than the foe ahead. The Black Queen, she saw, was patiently awaiting them.

The Painted Knife's fingers clenched around the hilt of her blades when she took in the full sight. The glacier had been turned into a blasphemous challenge to the Heavens, sculpted by eldritch power to nestle a great throne upon which the Enemy was seated. No, not seated. She was lounging, almost mockingly, with a long dragonbone pipe in hand. The Black Queen blew out a stream of smoke, eyeing them nonchalantly. The Bestowed slowed, spreading out as the Saint had ordered. Kallia felt Sidonia let out a delighted breath.

"Now that," the Vagrant Spear murmured, making the Mark of Valor with shaking fingers, "is a worthy foe. Honoured Gods, a thousand singing praises for offering a great struggle to this humble one. Blood spilled on these holy grounds I dedicate to your name, my unworthy life placed on the scales of your judgement."

Naturally, the Alavans was *excited* by the sight of this. She should have known better than to expect wariness from a Heavens-maddened lover of war. The Blade of Mercy glanced at them.

"Prayer," Kallia explained in Chantant.

The boy looked approving. It was probably for the best he did not know about Levantine battle prayers. Whatever chatter had bloomed was whisked out then the Great Elder strode to the forefront, passing even the Saint of the Blades and the Mirror Knight.

"Child," he said, tone appalled. "What have you done to yourself?"

Sidonia shuffled impatiently. She did not know Lower Miezan, and so had no understanding of the conversation taking place.

"What needed to be done," the Black Queen calmly replied. "My side doesn't get to walk away clean, Pilgrim. I see you've been tossing around resurrections like they're godsdamned solstice treats, too. Charming. Not going to have any long-term ramifications at all."

The monster paused, then leaned forward.

"Did that register as a lie?" she grinned. "It didn't, did it? Have a good think about that one next time you try to sleep, Pilgrim."

"Surrender," the Great Elder said. "Abdicate. It is not too late."

"You missing the part where I'm currently winning the battle?" the Black Queen drawled. "Hells, it's not too late for you either. Terms were offered and they hold. Take your army and go home. This doesn't need to turn into a Named pissing contest."

"You would argue this, after slaying thousands?" the Pilgrim asked.

"I feel like we might need to revisit the concept of foreign invasion," the villain noted. "Specifically the part where it has fucking *consequences*. Like, you know, people dying. You'd think that one would be a given, but apparently you're slow learners. Wahwah, my attempt to conquer a – sort of – sovereign nation wasn't met with flowers and a godsdamned parade. It's almost like we're not happy about the whole thing. Go figure."

"And you think your reign a better alternative?" the Grey Pilgrim asked calmly.

"Hells, Pilgrim, I was *born* to rule," the Black Queen replied with a toothy grin. "But I'll settle for getting you fucks out of my backyard, this once. Any takers?"

The monster's gaze swept across the crowd of Bestowed as she idly emptied her pipe and put it away within her cloak. The only answer was Light blooming and weapons raised.

"Ah, well," the Black Queen mused. "Pissing contest it is, then."

—

If Akua had always known heroism was this entertaining, she would have begun dabbling *years* ago. A hook of Light lashed out at her as the healer Named shaped the heavenly power and tore through her throne, but she'd already been moving when the working had just begun. Landing in a crouch atop her glacier, she unsheathed her sword and tapped it pensively against her armoured leg. It was unfortunate that the deception required her to remain in dearest Catherine's garments, as they were admittedly horrid, but needs must. The body was wonderfully responsive, and though without the Gift the mantle allowed her powers not fundamentally different. Tainted with Winter, perhaps, but that was no great trouble for her. Her angry little overlord had, as usual, allowed herself to fear her own power to such extent it crippled her when instead she should have been learning to master the influence. One never quite

escaped one's origins, it seemed. A shame Catherine was disinclined to take lessons from her in such matters.

Akua Sahelian was no stranger to otherworldly influences, and so she embraced Winter eagerly.

The mantle howled through her veins, and eyeing the healer and his grim little sentinel she flicked her wrist. Her glacial throne, a useful mass of ice she had chosen as her seat for purposes both practical and theatrical, twisted sharply and speared forward. The Saint of Swords shattered it within a heartbeat, sword clearing the scabbard, but Akua was unmoved. Ice remained ice, even when broken to pieces. An exertion of will transmuted the shards into cold mist and it fell over the pair of heroes like a blanket. Beneath her a man with a mirror-like shield was climbing the glacier with unseemly haste. And was that sorcery she felt? What familiar taste. A pilum of concentrated yellow flame tore towards her, and she raised a contemptuous eyebrow. The Half-Hornet, truly? How provincial. No one she knew would be caught dead using that in a serious battle.

She leapt down, feet landing on the climbing hero's head, and measured the angle so the only corrective action the spell formula allowed for would fall well short of her. The sorcery hit the glacier with a thunderous crash, splitting it in two. Ugh, he'd even overcharged it. It was like watching a grown woman improperly dose last season's poison. Movement flicked at the edge of her vision and Akua's boot came down to smash the helmet beneath her, forcing the hero down and allowing her to avoid the Saint's blow by less than an inch. The tips of Catherine's pathetically unadorned crown were shaved cleanly off. The sorceress threw herself to the side, sliding down the falling glacier as streaks of light further shattered what had been a very tasteful throne, in her opinion. A piece of the crown fell at her side, and once more Akua mourned Catherine had not even been willing to add some sapphires to it. They were only moderately costly to import through Mercantis, and they would have fit a Queen of Winter perfectly. A triad of heroes, two of them Levantines by the skin tone, charged towards her as she caught her footing at the edge of the slope. The pair still shrouded in mist, she noted, were beginning to disperse it.

That just wouldn't do.

Akua flicked her wrist and turned the mist they'd inhaled to ice again, clogging up their throats and lungs. Transmutation, she noted approvingly, came particularly easy to the mantle. Likely a consequence of the ever-fluid nature of the fae, or that these waters had come from Arcadia in the first place. The triad closed in, an inexplicably barefoot woman serving as the tip of the wedge.

"Glory in strife," the beggar screamed out in Lunara.

Did Catherine know any Levantine tongues? Most likely not. Still, a responding battle cry was in order. It was the heroic thing to do. Something about Callow? Akua pondered her understanding of Catherine's temper. *I am angry*, the sorceress decided, *because I am disappointed as I have mystifyingly failed to grasp that the Heavens prefer their pawns powerful yet rather dim. I*

must now protect the venerable sanctity of farms and countless peasants everywhere, as I am very concerned with their fate even though they are ignorant and full of lice.

"Fuck off and die," Akua called back, tinting her voice with wroth.

There. Crass more than witty, but Catherine did tend to walk that line. Entirely disinclined to engage three Heavens-empowered hardened killers with only a sword and dubious moral grounds in hand, she retreated into the waters and let them envelop her fully. Breathing was not necessary to this body, after all, and she could feel her foes where eyesight failed. She took a moment to touch the marching dead with her mind, noting with approval that though after the heroes claimed her attention she'd only succeeded in making them mindlessly advance and attack, they were bleeding the crusaders. Slowly but surely. She'd been rather displeased at the haste the enemy approached her with, as she'd been amusing herself by redeploying Catherine's old goblin tricks against fresh opposition. A heartbeat later, the water surrounding her blew away as the Saint's blow forced the marsh to recede.

"There you are," the unseemly old woman grinned.

"Dodge," Akua replied with a friendly smile, greatly enjoying herself.

Two massive blocks of ice formed into the waters on each side, their mass smashing forward and sending the tide hurtling back towards both of them. The wicked enemy of all things Callowan blinked in surprise, but alas it was not to be. Starlight stolen and made a streak cut towards the sorceress, evaporating the water and prompting a frown. This was not mere heavenly lightshow: it was the principle of untainted radiance directly from firmament, made into a weapon. Such a thing could be interrupted by workings, but it would take nothing less than a miracle to usurp or reshape it. Fortunately, she was not without answer. The gate opened before her, a perfect circle pressing back the fabric of Creation, and Akua carefully threaded the needle. Difficult, on such short notice, yet not impossible to a practitioner of her skill. Orienting the gate properly, she wove will into forming the corresponding exit behind the trifling Proceran who'd tried to hit her with childish sorcery. The radiance hit him in the back before he could react, though to Akua's displeasure it did no harm. The Pilgrim could control his working to a truly despicable extent. Tying off the two gates so she could not be made to suffer the backlash of their breaking, the sorceress condensed a platform of ice to leap off of before the Saint could bisect her.

She landed smoothly atop the water on a foothold of ice, moving towards the flank of the assembled heroes before the old cutter could catch up with her. The enemy seemed puzzled, she saw, by her refusal to engage them on their own terms. Had Catherine truly traded blows with them up close? The sorcerers almost wrinkled her nose. Waving about swords was the business of people who *failed* to murder demigods for power. Perhaps it was time to make that exceedingly clear to the opposition. Winter burning gloriously through her frame, Akua Sahelian shaped the full power of the mantle. Half a mile of marshlands

turned to ice as she remained standing on an elegant pillar, the surrounding waters disappearing as they froze and gathered into a monumental ball of frost hovering over the heroes. The Saint was running on now solid ground, sword flashing to carve a groove through both Creation and the pillar, but the sorceress merely cocked an eyebrow. Even severed, the upper part of the pillar remained unmoving in the air. Fire and starlight shattered the mass of ice, but the heroes were gravely mistaken if they thought this was a mere foot to stomp on them with. A flick of the wrist had the ice transmuting back into water and falling into a shower over the Named.

Another flick had it freezing again, and they were buried in falling ice.

"Come now," Akua said. "This is as obvious an opening as you'll get."

The Saint of Swords was a wizened old killer, with an impressive reputation. She was not, however, invincible. Even as she turned around in an instinctive parry, the old woman took the arrow in the shoulder as the Archer finally made her presence known. The sorceress felt the trembling heat of the wounded heroine, and Winter demanded her screaming death. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mind, will lashing out to take the mantle by the throat and choke it. The urges receded ever so slightly. More dangerous than she'd believed, this influence. The principle alienation was similar in nature to the bleed from binding an ancient devil, but unlike the latter it did not recede after the moment of binding. Akua leapt down from the pillar, power lashing out to smash both broken halves on the Saint. The heroine flickered with Light and it pulsed in a perfect ring around her. Aspect, the sorceress decided. Weak enough it could likely be used more than once, which would be difficult to deal with. No matter, there were more tempting prey. Akua felt mild revulsion at the term her thought had ended by, to her surprise.

She did not have the time to linger on the matter, as the heroes had escaped her little greeting gift. Light broke through the ice, once, twice, and then in an eruption of steam the entire structure vanished. The second-rate wizard's doing, she suspected. For a heartbeat she mused leaving the battle entirely, going to lead the dead personally, but found she could not. It would mean leaving Archer on her own, something she could not accept. The notion displeased her, even. The sorceress' brow creased. This was not coincidence. She could feel her mind even struggling to consider the subject, which was telling. Feeling the Saint pivot to cut through a second arrow, Akua moved towards the other heroes as she fought the influence.

"Oh," she murmured to herself after a moment. "My dear, that is *exquisitely* done."

The sorceress had slipped her bindings by snatching an errant piece of Winter and making it her own. Through it she'd opened a path to the greater mantle that she'd eventually managed to crawl through, entirely so when she found no opposition awaiting. In her current state, it would be impossible for her to claim this body if Catherine disallowed it. The discrepancy in will and power was overwhelming. Yet using the sliver of Winter, Akua had succeeded in sta-

bilizing the construct she now inhabited and claiming use of the full mantle – which she'd drawn on, this entire fight. The path going both ways, the mantle itself was now influencing her. Which had seemed a minor concern, until she realized that Catherine Foundling had bound her very soul into its fabric. The more Akua drew on the mantle, the more she called back the body's true owner. *I had wondered, as to why you never had Hierophant lay deeper bindings on me*, the sorceress thought. *It never truly mattered, did it? You left yourself a backdoor.* She could not help but approve. Perhaps some mundane sorts would have been horrified, but Akua had first ripped out her own soul to use as a tool as the tender age of thirteen. Ruthlessness turned against yourself could be a very useful tool, if properly employed. In matters of self-mutilation for the sake of advancement, she must admit Catherine Foundling had few rivals. Eyeing the spreading steam, Akua made a decision. Struggling against this was pointless, and might be taken as treachery she did not intend.

"Let it not be said, my Empress, that I did not offer service leal and true," Akua Sahelian mused.

She called on Winter again, the fullness of the mantle, and kept digging deeper until her vision blurred. Her reward did not take long to be delivered.

Back into the box, Diabolist.

Darkness came, yet Akua smiled.

A useful tool, after all, was never allowed to rest for long.

Chapter 17

Contingent

> "Peace is little more than the reognition that the reasons for which war was undertaken are no longer relevant."
>
> Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

I came back to myself with a roiling sea of Winter at my fingertips.

Fucking Hells, Akua. The trap I'd set that ultimately brought me back had required that the Diabolist or another entity to essentially go mad with power for it to work in the first place, but this was still beyond my predictions. Even with oaths binding her and Vivienne holding a leash, what I saw beneath me was a dark reminder of the quantity of power that could be thrown around without breaking the letter of the limitations I'd imposed. Half of the lake I'd dumped over the head of the crusaders with Masego's help had apparently been used to smash the heroes, though I saw no corpses to show for the effort. Not that one of those would necessarily mean the end of it, with the Pilgrim around. Five contingencies, and this had been the one to work. I could not help but be pissed that even after all that planning in the end it'd come down to Akua making a mistake, however baited that mistake had been. Hierophant was nowhere in sight, so he was probably incapacitated. That was one down. Thief's secret set of oaths must not have been sufficient to call me back from that... unpleasant journey, which made two. I'd not woken up to a sword through my back, so Larat hadn't worked out either – but then that had always been the chanciest of the five. The oath forced on the fae had been comprehensive, but with that sort of creature it was hard to make one completely water-tight. He'd failed, either on purpose or not. I'd have to get the details out of him, but regardless that made three.

As for the last trick, well, it had very specific requirements. I wasn't surprised it hadn't gotten me out, though I'd need to have Hierophant take a look at the overlay as soon as possible. We were pretty sure it wouldn't *kill* me if it triggered by accident, but there were always risks in turning yourself into living munitions.

I held the power in check, barely, as my gaze swept the battlefield. Ten heroes, looking ragged but unbowed. The Saint had taken an arrow, which meant Indrani was up and about. A relief, that. The rest were clustered together, protecting the Pilgrim and the wizard I'd scrapped with that one time. The thousand little bundles in the back of my mind made it clear Akua had indulged in a spot of necromancy, which brought mixed feelings. For all that Masego insisted there was nothing inherently bad about that kind of sorcery, after Second Liesse I had my doubts. Maybe there were applications that weren't inherently horrid, but no one seemed to be actually using those. On the other hand, if the undead were getting chopped up that meant fewer of my soldiers were dying. I could appreciate the results, even if the means had me more than a little uncomfortable. I'd take a closer look a those later. For now, I was juggling the difficulty of maintaining the ice beneath my feet that kept me on the surface of this eerie marsh while simultaneously trying not to blow up either myself or my surroundings with the power Diabolist had drawn. My grip was beginning to slip, so action was in order. Senses no mortal could have were in full extension, telling me of the humidity in the air and the spread of both water and ice in my surroundings.

I dumped the power into the water beneath me, flash-freezing it with a loud snap as I continued spreading and shaping the working. The glacier formed at a mind-boggling pace, water rippling around it, and I closed my eyes to focus. Getting the paddles of the waterwheel all the same size was difficult, though it grew easier the more power I shed. I could have made it larger, not that it wasn't already massive, but just a structure of ice wasn't what I had in mind. Fingers clenching, I severed the platform I stood on from the wheel and lashed out with my will. Slowly, the wheel began to turn. The waters churned. I continued dumping power into the movement, accelerating it, and the tide of soiled water raged towards the heroes with a roar. *Fuck it*, I thought, and tossed the wheel at them too. We were past subtlety at this point. Eyes flicking towards the Saint, I sighed as she carved herself a path above the current and stood atop the arc. That'd been too much to hope for, I supposed. An arrow whistled at her and I took advantage of the opening Archer had just gifted me to move further away as I riffled through the bundles in the back of my mind until I could find Zombie. Good girl that she was, she'd been waiting on the edge of the marshlands. She seemed pleased by my summons, taking flight with haste.

I wasn't sure what Akua's plan had been but it hardly mattered. While it looked like she might have been getting the better of the fight with the heroes, fighting them at all was a mistake as far as I was concerned. Even if I killed a few they'd still get me in the end. In the distance I heard a gargantuan crack as the ice wheel fractured into pieces merrily carried by the currents, heroes having climbed atop them. That, as it happened, was an opening I'd left on purpose. I drew on Winter, feeling it whisper lovingly in my ears, and shattered the wheel shards. That dumped the heroes back into the water, though the

fucking wizard made some kind of ring of fire that evaporated a safe place for them to gather and regroup. Saint was back on the offensive, making her way to me, but I wasn't having any of that. Zombie made a low pass and I leapt atop her saddle, fingers slipping into her mane to anchor me while I got my feet in the stirrups. We went high after that, the undead horse's wings beating hard as we ascended. My cloak was wet, I only then noticed. Like I'd been swimming. What the fuck had Akua been up to? No, not the time. By the height of the sun it was morning still, and promising to be a warm day. Not a cloud in sight. My mount gliding slowly, I took a look at the broader situation unfolding across the field.

The undead were shambling forward into a defensive Proceran line near what must have been a shore, before most the water in the marsh was used as ammunition in the Named brawl below me. The dead were not making an impressive showing. They seemed to have some semblance of intelligence, but there was no real coordination. They went in waves and shattered on the formations of fantassins and the priests accompanying them. Still, casualties were slowly mounting. I suspected the first few waves must have been wiped almost without losses, but now the crusaders were tiring and beginning to make mistakes. There was, to my surprise, another front to the battle. The Army of Callow was out in force, though there were a lot fewer of them than I'd expected. Had Juniper left men to guard the camp? Regardless, if she was leading this engagement she was being rather conservative in her command. Mages on both sides were trading spells at a pace, but aside from a long shield wall of regulars pressing against crusader lines there was no other real fighting going on. *She's not fighting to win*, I thought, frowning as I watched the Order of the Broken Bell manoeuver on the flank to draw away enemy cavalry without ever engaging. *She's delaying and tying down men while incurring as few casualties as possible*.

That was unlike the Hellhound, who tended to go for the throat whenever she could. Which meant she was relying on the dead to do the heavy lifting – and by extension had relied on *Akua*. That was a desperate measure if I'd ever seen one. The situation must be worse than it looked on the surface. The moment the front holding back the dead collapsed the battle was good as won, barring heroic intervention, but at the current pace that might take hours. My brow tightened as I scanned the battlefield for any hint of the Wild Hunt's presence, but they were nowhere in sight. Had the fae sat on their asses the entire time I'd been gone? Fuck. It was a solid assumption there'd been a battle while I was gone, and without the fae the Army of Callow would have been fighting Named with only Legion mages to back them up, while the enemy had wizards and priests both. *It must have been a fucking slaughter.* Were the men I saw below all that was left of our host? There were what, maybe thirteen or fourteen thousand there? The Procerans looked like they'd taken a beating too, lost at least another few thousand since I'd dropped the lake on them, but Malanza could afford those losses a lot more than we could. She was throwing

away levies and fantassins, not professional soldiers.

While I'd been taking my look around, the heroes had gotten their shit together. A beam of radiant light – fucking Pilgrim – tore up towards me, followed by a swarm of little balls of flame that looked liquid. I led Zombie into a deep dive to shake the projectiles. Archer could take care of herself, I decided. She was probably half a mile away and picking her targets carefully, in no danger of being swarmed by the enemy. Just in case I wove a glamour into large streaks of yellow and red indicating she should disengage even as I spurred Zombie to head towards the shore battle line. I whistled loudly as my mount's hooves swept just above the water. It was not long before I had my answer. Loyal dogs that they were, the Wild Hunt came as summoned. There was an eldritch glimmer on the surface of the water at my side before Larat came riding out in full armour, sword in hand and grinning broadly. Even as his horse kept pace with mine, the rest of the Hunt emerged in our wake.

"Your Majesty," the one-eyed fae greeted me. "Was your journey a fruitful one?"

"We're going to have a talk about that, you little weasel," I darkly said. "But it'll have to wait. I have work for the lot of you."

"We await your will eagerly," the raven-haired man replied.

"Ignore the heroes unless they attack you," I ordered. "See those Proceran formations ahead?"

My sword helpfully pointed out the Proceran defensive line.

"Their fear and desperation wafts most pleasantly to my nostrils," Larat informed me.

They did to mine as well, and Winter grew hungry for the banquet, but I forced myself to focus.

"Break them," I said. "Killing's not the objective, the Hunt is to concentrate on shattering their lines."

"Tasteless meat," the one-eye fae complained.

"That sounds like the talk of a man hungry for fingers," I noted very mildly.

The bastard laughed.

"Your will be done, Sovereign of Moonless Nights," he smiled.

"It better, for your sake," I smiled back cheerfully. "Because you seem to have fucked around in my absence, and we're going to have a nice chat about that."

I didn't even allow him to respond, pulling Zombie up and willing one of her wing beats to splash water in his face. Let him try to look all elegant and sinister with muck everywhere. I absently tugged on the reins to lead my mount towards the crusaders, but my mind was elsewhere. I needed to keep the heroes busy for a while, there was no telling what they'd get up to unattended. I reached for the dead, grimacing after a moment. Ordering them one by one would take too long. I thinned my will and cast it broadly, grabbing a rough thousand still roving around. Pain spiked through my forehead. *Too much feedback.* I grit my teeth and ordered them to assault the heroes before

withdrawing my will. They weren't going to win that fight – a band of tired and encircled heroes fighting back to back against a relentless tide of undead? It had victory written all over it – but it should keep them out of my hair for a while. I tasted the warmth of the enemy Named, trying to get a sense of their readiness, and my fingers clenched. There should be ten. There were only eight. Where had they – no, it wasn't even worth asking. They would be at the very worst possible place for me.

Guarding Rozala Malanza.

I allowed myself a moment to contemplate the unpleasantness that was fighting people both stronger than me and certain to be where I least wanted them to be before pressing down against Zombie's back. She neighed and angled for descent as we flew towards the back of the Proceran lines. A handful of archers loosed arrows upwards, but I was too far and too swift for them to have any real chance of hitting me. Unfortunately, mages were bullshit and evidently I was both recognizable and a favoured target. Panes of opaque yellow force formed around me in an airtight box, but they were in above their heads this time. When it came to power, pound for pound, there were only a few people in Calernia who could beat me if I put my back into it. A lance of ice and shade formed around my hand and Zombie dove down. There was a heartbeat of resistance when the tip of the lance met the sorcery, then they both shattered and we flew through as my cloak trailed behind me. With a target painted on us so blatantly, it was no surprise I had to lead Zombie into a desperate roll to avoid being incinerated by a beam of light. It caught the edge of my cloak, leaving it singed and smoking. Fucking Pilgrim. It was supposed to be resistant to magic, wasn't it?

He was down there, as I'd suspected. Leaning on his staff, the Saint of Swords by his side and waiting patiently for me to gain enough momentum I wouldn't be able to pull out of the dive when she struck. Malanza was behind them, and as the air whistled around me I got a glimpse of her face. Fear, yes, but much more anger. I had to respect that she remained on her horse and unmoving even as my descent quickened. Her officers were not so brave, scattering to the winds. I'd have to play this one precisely, if I wanted to avoid getting skewered in the process of landing. Fortunately, I was spending increasingly large amounts of my life either falling from things or being thrown off of them. I'd become a fair hand at it. I drew on Winter and shaped it, tossing ahead of me a spear of mist that detonated into a cloud. Throwing myself off Zombie, I ordered her to peel off even as my relationship with gravity took a sharp turn downwards. This, I mused, had seemed a better idea *before* I'd gone through with it. The timing held. A cut dispersed the mist, missing Zombie by a mere inch. Then the Saint struck again and I cursed.

I threw ice at the cut, saving my hide just long enough for my feet to land on wet earth. Mud sucked at my boots and both my knees snapped, but they were reforming before I even stood. The Saint of Swords was lazily advancing, the Pilgrim pointed his staff and Malanza looked like she *really* wanted to be

pretty much anywhere else.

"Truce," I called out. "I'm here to talk."

"I'm not seeing a banner," the Saint noted.

Really? She was such a godsdamned asshole. I flicked my fingers and wove one out of glamour, but she pointedly did not look at it.

"I don't want to fight you," I insisted.

"So don't," she suggested. "Angle your neck a little to the side, it'll be a cleaner cut."

She was closing distance, which I knew from experience would result in my getting chopped up painfully and repeatedly.

"Pilgrim," I tried, looking behind her. "This can end *right now*."

"Gods forgive me," the old man said. "But you are right. It will."

"The battle is lost," I said. "Your lines by the shore are collapsing as we speak. Even if you force me to flee, none of that changes."

"Armies are armies," the Saint shrugged. "Named are Named. More than one way to win a war."

One step away from striking range, now. And the moment she got there we entered the wheel of pain, where every spoke was me losing a limb and trying very hard not to scream. The bundle of instincts that were not my own was licking its chops, hungry for the fight. To crush my enemies and savour their screams. The rest insisted I make some distance, because this was about to get ugly. I unsheathed my sword. *This isn't going to work*, I thought, but I had to try anyway. My fingers came loose and I dropped the blade.

"Unarmed," I said. "Under truce banner."

"You're a weapon unto yourself," the Saint of Swords snorted, and stepped forward.

From the corner of my eye I saw implacable light bloom at the tip of the Grey Pilgrim's staff. If I got hit by that, I suspected the consequences would be much more unpleasant than a sword wound. Nothing friendly felt the way that power did.

"Stop."

I'd been reaching for Winter, but stayed my hand. That was not the Pilgrim's voice, and certainly not the Saint's. Rozala Malanza took off her helmet, sweat-soaked curls falling across her face.

"You want to talk, Black Queen," she said. "So talk."

"You fucking yellow-bellied-" the Saint began.

"I am the ranking general of this army, Regicide," the Princess of Aequitan coldy replied. "I take no orders from you. Slay me or stay your tongue."

By the looks of her, the heroine was feeling inclined towards the second. The light winked out on the Pilgrim's staff.

"Laurence," he said. "She cannot easily retreat. If talks fail, we will strike."

That wasn't how fucking truce talks were supposed to work, but then I'd not exactly respected the usual etiquette either. Disinclined as I was to give them a full pass, I would at least recognize they had some wiggling room when

it came interpretation. The heroes were a distraction here, I decided. The one who mattered was the princess watching me with hard eyes.

"Battle's over, Malanza," I said. "Let's end it before any more people die pointlessly."

"I was assured you could not open your deathly gate again without the Hierophant," the Proceran said flatly. "He is not here. The battle is not yet lost."

"So maybe you wreck my army," I said. "Even if you manage that, yours gets wrecked in the process as well. And you can be sure enough of my people survive to run that we can defend Hedges against what you have left. Logistically, you're *done*. You don't have the supplies or the men for a successful offensive into Callow."

"If we take your supplies-"she began.

"Not happening. I gave standing orders to burn what we can't carry, if we lose," I interrupted brusquely.

Her eyes flicked to the Pilgrim, and reluctantly the old man nodded. The Saint's already grim expression darkened further.

"I will not *surrender* to the likes of you," the princess snarled.

My fingers clenched.

"Gods Below, what will it *take*?" I hissed. "Do I have to murder ever last Proceran on this field before negotiations can be had? Are you really so unwilling to consider not invading you'll let dozens of thousands *starve*?"

"Your doing," Malanza hissed back. "You steal our supplies, harass us and then claim affront at our desperation? You are the architect of this madness, Catherine Foundling."

Winter whispered in my ear, urging me to rip apart the righteous little shit who had the gall to pretend she was the victim here while leading a fucking invasion army. My fingers dug into my palm until steel gave and flesh beneath it, blood dripping on the ground. The Saint's stance shifted ever so slightly. Breathe in, breathe out. Pride was a liability. Anger an unhelpful bias. *Be cold*, I told myself. *Be clear. Be a creature of logic, because logic is what gets you through this. Everything else is distracting noise.* I thought of pale green eyes, and lessons I had not yet outgrown.

"Then do not surrender," I said calmly. "Sound a withdrawal. My side will do the same. We can discuss terms for your retreat from Callow when our people aren't dying."

"And allow hunger to do your work for you?" the princess retorted.

"I'd be putting down an army of the dead as a gesture of good will, Malanza," I said. "My concession is greater than yours."

Her face remained unmoved by the statement, but she was silent for a moment.

"Supplies for the night," she said. "Food, water and tents. Delivered after we tend to the wounded."

I forced myself to consider the counter-offer calmly. Would those make enough of a difference I should bargain down? Vivienne still had their old

foodstuffs in her metaphorical pocket, so it shouldn't lead to logistical issues for the Army of Callow if I shelled thse out. It would still mean that the enemy, while not fresh, would at least have full bellies. They'd be closer to fighting fit. If negotiations broke down afterwards – no, wrong way to think about it. If we had a night to spare, odds were I'd be able to get Hierophant back up. My comparative advantage was greater, even with the undead tossed aside.

"They'll be added to your bill," I said.

The princess opened her mouth.

"Flat cost," I added. "No surcharge."

Her mouth closed. Grudgingly, she nodded. We both knew that if negotiations failed any talk of coin would become academic anyway.

"Truce until negotiations come at an end," I said. "First session held at noon tomorrow."

"Granted," Malanza replied.

My eyes flicked to the Named at her sides.

"That includes heroes," I said.

"I take no orders from mortal rulers," the Saint flatly said.

I ignored her. She was irrelevant in this, unless she was willing to fight the entire Army of Callow on her own. Even if she got the rest of the heroes to back her, it wouldn't be enough.

"You can't seriously expect me to feed and shelter your army while we're under attack by your allies," I told Malanza.

The Proceran looked like she'd swallowed a lemon.

"I will formally renounce alliance with any hero resuming hostilities while we are under truce," she said. "I can do no more."

It'd be enough, I decided. Might even be better if the Saint attacked after that, we'd get a clean shot at her without making a diplomatic mess.

"I strike bargain under these terms," I said.

I got my gauntlet off and offered my hand. Revulsion flickering across her face, the princess spat on the ground.

"I strike bargain under these terms," she replied. "Get out of my sight, Black Queen."

I supposed we were past courtesy, at this point. It'd never been my strong suit anyway. I crouched to pick up my sword and sheathed it, keeping an eye on the furious Saint as I did. She turned and walked away. The Pilgrim sought to meet my eyes, studying me a pensive frown, but I was done with him. Zombie landed moments later, a handful of arrows having sprouted in her flank since I'd last seen her. The enemy archers had been busy. It still took half an hour before the battle came entirely at an end, the last of the dead dropping into the mud like a stringless puppet, but it ended.

None of this felt like a victory, but at least it wasn't a defeat.

Chapter 18

Cradle

> "Seven battles I won on my feet, and lost the war sitting at a table."
>
> Periander Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, after the founding of the League of Free Cities

"Six hundred and thirty-two dead," Juniper said. "Our edge has been scraped *raw*, Catherine."

I was really beginning to regret that oath to Hakram, because a bottle of aragh right now would do wonders for my peace of mind. I'd guessed it was bad, when I'd taken a look from the sky, but I hadn't understood quite how bad it had really gotten. I leaned back into my seat and passed a hand through my mess of a hair.

"You did better than I could have hoped," I admitted. "Considering what the other side was fielding, it's a miracle it went this well."

Miracle was the wrong word, I decided a moment later. It was short-changing Juniper. While I'd been traipsing about the magical wonderland of Winter, the Hellhound had been dancing on the edge against an army about twice the size led by heroes. That she'd not just lasted the day but actually inflicted a defeat was a reminder that Juniper of the Red Shields did not need a Name to be one of the sharpest knives in my arsenal.

"The casualties are trouble, but there's worse," the Hellhound grunted. "We're near out of munitions, and without accord with the Tower the moment our stores run dry we lose one of our heaviest advantages."

"Goblinfire?" I asked.

"Enough for one last blaze, but not a large one," my Marshal replied. "We're entirely out of demolition charges. Sappers still have a decent stock of combat munitions, but you know how fast we go through those when they're properly used."

Even if I hadn't been taught the logistics of that at the College, Ratface's constant reminders that a protracted campaign would see us run dry halfway through would have served that purpose. Once again, Malicia managed to fucks

us without ever needing to do anything but say no. The Snake Eater Tribe that had settled near Marchford had made it clear it could not produce munitions, which meant the vicious old crones in the Grey Eyries had a monopoly. It was illegal under Imperial law for anyone but the Tower to possess munitions, not that it would have stopped me if I had a solid way to get them into Callow. I didn't, and there were watchful eyes at the border just in case I felt like trying anyway.

"I heard we took a hit on siege engines," I ventured.

Which was a polite way to say that Pickler had spent exactly three heartbeats welcoming me back before beginning to rant about the Grey Pilgrim apparently wrecking her lovelies. I'd taken that to mean the repeating scorpions, and while I did not share the slightly unsettling affection my Senior Sapper had for her creations the loss of them was still a heavy blow. They were one of our major force equalizers.

"Two repeating scorpions left, no Spitters," Juniper said. "We've still got our full count of ballistas and trebuchets, but they've already proven they can make those irrelevant with their fences."

As our skirmishing contingent consisted of pretty much only the Watch, that left the mages lines as our only effective long-range option. Which wasn't saying much, considering they'd have to deal with both wizards and priests on the other side. They'd be spending most their time on defence and damage control, not going on the offensive.

"Don't count on the mages," the Hellhound warned. "We've been running them ragged for two days, fighting and healing. A lot of them are on the edge of burning out."

I sighed, fingers drumming against the arms of the chair.

"You're telling me we can't have another battle," I said.

"Not if you want to have a force capable of fighting afterwards," Juniper bluntly said. "Four to six months of recruiting and refit, and we'll be able to campaign again. Anything else is scrapping the host."

"Well," I said. "That adds a certain spice to the negotiations, doesn't it?"

The orc grunted in amusement, and I allowed myself a moment of envy as she drank a mouthful of wine. My own cup was, sadly, water. Which I didn't need anymore, or particularly enjoy.

"Had a good look when we engaged this morning," Juniper said. "They're on their last rope too. Without their officers they've had to rely on fantassins for frontline command, and we bloodied those repeatedly. Levies got bled bad, and the principality troops were always few. Most of their soldiers are fantassins, now, and mercenaries won't be eager for another go."

"They've got heroes, Juniper," I reminded her. "Morale's not ever going to be an issue for them."

"You say that, but we know for a fact they had runners after the first gate trick," the Hellhound said. "Kegan's already caught a few up north, trying to flee back to the passage."

"The meat of them will stay," I said. "Still, worth keeping in mind at least half their host is gone. Gods, fifty thousand. I still have a hard time believe we held against that."

"Wouldn't have, without the gate," the orc said. "Though that wasn't without costs."

I couldn't call it luck, not with the amount of contingencies I'd had waiting, but I couldn't deny it'd turned into a gamble in the end. I'd been so sure that if we kept the positioning aligned for only a short while... No point in whining. They had used their abilities, as I had mine. A mistake had been made, all I could do was learn from it. That particular tool wasn't going to be put away entirely, but the restrictions on where and how it could be used had to be adjusted.

"It all rests on diplomacy, then," I said.

"Your speciality, infamously," Juniper said, rather drily.

I hadn't even been back for a full day and already my underlings were ragging on me. I flipped her off, feeling the weight on my shoulders lighten the slightest bit. It just wouldn't feel like home without the sarcasm. I groaned and rose to my feet.

"Best I get started on Masego," I sighed. "It could take the entire night, if it gets tricky."

"Don't linger," the Hellhound said. "This all falls apart if you're not at the table. He's not going anywhere."

I nodded. Much as I disliked the thought of leaving my friend under any longer than I had to, as long as he was in no danger of death there were higher priorities. Having him at the table with me, even if he was blatantly bored with the proceedings, would get a point across. But uncertainty would have to do, if it took too long. I clasped Juniper's shoulder in farewell, but paused when I felt her hand take mine. She tightened her grip, face half-hidden by her fur-like dark hair.

"Good to have you back," Juniper got out, looking away. "It's not the same without you."

I embrace her, awkwardly given our respective sizes, but after that I couldn't not.

"We're still in it, Juniper," I murmured. "Bloodied but on our feet."

She shook me off, but only after a moment.

"Go away, Foundling," she growled, sounding embarrassed. "And don't let me catch you sleeping through a battle again. It's horrible for our reputation."

"Yes ma'am," I replied amusedly.

She looked highly insulted by how sloppy my farewell salute was, and the good mood clung to me all the way back to Masego's tent. I'd know she was there without ever taking a look. People had a warmth to them that I had learned to discern. Orcs were warmer than humans, as a rule, and goblins almost feverish to my senses. Archer burned warmer than any of them. My mantle stirred, tasting the sheer vitality in the air with relish. Indrani looked,

at first glance, perfectly relaxed. She'd moved the folding chair she was was on so she could rest her bare feet on Masego's guts and was casually chipping away at a chunk of wood with a knife. The carving looked like the beginning of a fox to me, but given her dubious artistic skills that meant very little. Her body was perfectly loose and at a rest, but the eyes gave it away. It wasn't the restlessness of a woman who couldn't wait to move I saw there. It was the silent frustration of someone who had a problem in front of them but no way to do anything about it. Shaving off another sliver of wood, Archer flicked it at Masego's face to join a growing pile and offered me a wan smile.

"Cat," she said. "Wondered when you'd come."

Part of me wanted to simply get what I'd come here to do done as soon as possible, but instead I claimed a chair and dropped it by her side. Boots resting on the edge of the bed instead of Hierophant himself, since I was a good and loyal friend, I made myself comfortable.

"Had to talk with Juniper," I told her. "Get the lay of the land."

She hummed, knife deftly twisting in her grip so she could change the angle she was carving at. How someone so good with knives could be so terrible at sculpting, I had no idea.

"We're fucked, but so is the other side, so we're all showing teeth and pretending it's a smile," Indrani said. "That about it?"

I snorted.

"More or less," I conceded.

A sliver fell to the ground. The tent was silent, save for Masego's spell-induced breathing and the quiet whisper of steel on wood.

"He's going to be all right," I said quietly.

"Is he?" Archer said quietly. "Not so sure about that."

I turned to glance at her and found her face aloof.

"You're angry," I said.

"Angry's not the right word," the other woman replied. "I get angry, I cut a throat. This is something else."

I folded my arms around my chest, feeling defensive but not quite sure why.

"Vexed?" I said.

Her smile was thin.

"A cousin of that, I reckon," Archer said. "I understand the Lady a little better, now. Wish I didn't."

"Thought you had a pretty good handle on her already," I said.

"As much as anyone can," Indrani shrugged. "But I did always wonder, why Refuge? Not like she enjoys running it. If it was just about the fights, she could have found those as a Calamity. They have a regular hero body count. And she still talks about your teacher like she's in love with him, or as close to that as she can be."

"But now you know," I said.

"I do," Archer agreed. "Put an arrow in that hard old biddy the Saint, this morning. Walking back to camp, after you gave the signal, I had a thought."

I remained silent, watching her.

"Catherine, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't really care about any of this," Indrani sighed, waving the knife around. "It was a good laugh when you put on that crown, and the scraps keep coming. Got no complaints about that. But they're just enemies not... *my* enemies, you get me?"

"It doesn't feel like your fight," I quietly said.

"You're my friend," she said. "So're the others, even Vivienne though she's usually a twat about it. It's not that I mind giving a hand, and I'm pretty sure we've still got legendary fights ahead of us. But it doesn't quite scratch the itch."

"Because it's not your story," I murmured.

"It's yours," Indrani agreed. "And there's something to being part of this. The Woe, or whatever you want to call it. I found something here I didn't know I wanted, back in Refuge. But I get the Lady, now, and why she left. Because this isn't something I was meant to do, just something I'm doing."

My throat clenched.

"You were always upfront about it," I said. "That you'd leave eventually."

"Stop looking like I kicked your unicorn," she sighed. "No one's abandoning you. I'm not Ranger, Cat. I want to see it through to the end, to see *what's* at the end. I don't have that... it's hard to put into words. She's old, you know, in a way I don't think we can really understand."

"I never got a hard number on her age," I admitted. "At least two hundred, but that's only rumours."

Archer's knife stilled, tapping against the side of the possible fox.

"It's the half-elf thing," she said. "You go in knowing the people you meet will be dust before you even hit your prime, and there's a part of you that doesn't grow roots. Because you know it's going to pass."

I thought of the man whose name we'd avoided saying, of a quiet conversation the two of us had had long before I loved or hated him. *They never understand*, he'd told me, so very tiredly. *Even if they love you, they never quite understand*. In this, as in so many things, I was still the bearer of his legacy.

"You look sad," Indrani said suddenly, and I found her eyes on me. "It's been a long time, since I've seen you so human."

The gentleness she'd said it with made it so much worse.

"I only ever seem to be," I murmured, "when I'm at my worst."

If It'd been Hakram at my side, he would have offered comfort. Masego would have given an explanation, brought reason into it. Vivienne... I still hesitated to be that open with her. The nature of our relationship had set boundaries. You could not bare your soul to the person you'd entrusted the means to kill you with, should it prove necessary. Indrani didn't say anything, though, because unlike the others she understood that some truths simply stayed with you. Like a scar, or a limp you barely even noticed.

"You ever miss her?" I asked.

"It's different, for us," Archer replied hesitatingly. "She's not my..."

Mother, I did not say. I knew a thing or two about words it cost to speak out loud.

"Isn't she?" I gently said.

Indrani laughed, but the mockery in it was not meant for me.

"It's deeper than that," she said. "She didn't tuck me in at night, Cat, she taught me a way to live. I didn't want someone holding my hand. Or maybe I did, fuck – I was a kid and I was scared. But she gave me what I needed instead. Being able to stand on my own feet."

"It's not a weakness, you know," I said. "Loving her for that."

Archer scoffed, looking away. I left it at that.

"You ever miss him?" she asked.

My smile was a bitter one.

"I shouldn't," I said.

It was admission enough. My friend suddenly snorted, jolting in remembrance.

"I had a talk with him once, after Marchford," Indrani admitted. "I was curious after hearing so many stories so I sought him out."

"You never told me about that," I said.

"Didn't think it mattered," she shrugged. "I was going to challenge him to a spar, but he had this look. . . "

I chuckled.

"Like before you even entered the room he'd figured out three ways to kill you," I said.

She grinned, and it had her hazelnut eyes alight. She was most beautiful, I thought, in fleeting moments. Indrani was easy on the eyes yet not so striking it took the breath away, without the scarf, but now and then there would be a moment and it was the only thing you could think about.

"Yeah, that," she agreed. "Couldn't find the nerve. We had tea, we talked about Refuge a bit and then about the battle against the demon."

She paused.

"And then after that, mild as you please, he smiled all nice and said that if I ever attacked you again he'd have me drowned," she added.

I blinked in confusion for a moment, before I remembered the first time I'd ever met Indrani. She'd burst out of a window without warning at the manor in Marchford, then slapped me around along with Hakram and Masego. While I was still freshly wounded from a fight with devils, no less. Gods, I'd completely forgotten about that. Archer cleared her throat.

"What I mean is, I think he does," she said. "Or did."

Love me, she meant. In his own way.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "He can put it in a box when he acts. It's not that I don't think it's genuine, it's just. . . "

"How can it be enough, if it can fit in a box?" she said.

I nodded.

"I think I can handle caring," I admitted. "As long as it also fits in a box."

Because it was one thing, to have this tangle of gratitude and affection within me that refused to go away, but it was another to let it dictate my actions. There was a chance, however slight, that I could get to the end without killing him. But there was a greater chance I couldn't, and when the time came I could not allow myself to hesitate. Not going against a man who wouldn't.

"You ever wonder if getting older just makes us more like them?" Archer asked, looking upwards at the ceiling of the tent. "Different roads, maybe, but going to the same place."

My boot scraped against the edge of the bed uneasily.

"I think we can learn from them without becoming them," I replied. "Or maybe I just want to, because the alternative scares me. Not sure it can really be called faith, when I'm more afraid of being wrong than believing I'm right."

"They wouldn't have called a truce," Indrani decided after a moment. "They would have found a way to kill every last one of them."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"I'm not so sure they would have been wrong to do that," I confessed.

I could feel her surprise without turning.

"Thought you are all about victory in peace, these days," Archer noted. "Peace after a lot of killing, sure, but making nice still being the end of the road."

"If I'd listened to Juniper and gone with Bonfire," I said. "A third of my army wouldn't be dead right now."

"You just got done sleeping off your last big move," she shrugged. "Not sure if it was the right call to pass on the Hellhound's plan, but I can't say for sure it was the wrong one either. Neither can you, unless you know things you're not telling me."

"So I keep telling myself," I said. "But so far, all my plan's gotten done is a lot of bleeding by people my duty is to *not* have bleeding. And it might fail, Indrani. That's the thorn on the stem. I need the other side to be willing to make a deal, and I'm less certain of that being a real possibility by the day. I thought Pilgrim was someone I could work with, but after this morning... They're not interested in both sides getting what they want, because if we get our way even a little bit they see it as a defeat."

"So beat them," Archer said. "Crush them so brutally they're not thinking about winning, just surviving. They'll take terms then."

I laughed harshly.

"Gods, I want to," I admitted. "It might not be easier, but it'd be *simpler*. If all I had to care about was coming out on top and what it takes to get there. And that's the hypocrisy of it. Because as much as I rail against them, what I'm after is utter victory as well. It just involves make treaties instead of invading another country."

"I'm still not hearing a reason not to step on them," Indrani said, frowning.

"Because Triumphant took ten years to conquer all of Calernia and five years to lose it," I said. "Just being strong isn't enough, because if strength

is all that keeps the peace then the moment you falter it's *gone*. And we all falter, eventually. You can't dance for decades without ever missing a step. I used to think Malicia lost sight of that, when she tried to get her hands on the doomsday weapon, but now I'm not so sure. After Second Liesse I told myself she'd put herself in the corner on her own. That by fanning the flames when Procer had its civil war she ensured sooner or later there'd be a reckoning, and then made it so much worse by trying to get the weapon. Now, though, I think I get where she was coming from. She thinks the only way they'll ever negotiate with her is if the alternative is annihilation. No uncertainty, no room for a turnaround. Just. . . "

I snapped my fingers.

"Gone."

"We rebuilding the fortress o'doom, then?" Archer asked. "I was under the impression we didn't care for it."

"Before I told Juniper to raise the army," I said. "Before I let everyone off the leash to rebuild Callow and get it on war footing, I drew a line for myself. That'd I'd only keep fighting so long as what I led to wasn't worse than surrendering to the crusade. Because if I can't even believe that much, I'm the problem more than them."

"No to the fortress o'doom, then," Indrani snorted. "I think? It can be hard to tell with you."

"If it takes Hellgates to make what I'm doing work, then it isn't worth doing," I replied. "The thing that gets me is, what I hate most about the heroes? I do it too. I'm furious that they think they should win just because they won't compromise, but when have I ever done the same when I had the power not to?"

And I couldn't just dismiss that. Because getting angry about them being stubborn didn't hold, when I was just as stubborn. I could believe they were wrong, but I couldn't just dismiss their right to disagree with me. The fury that burned whenever they cast their righteousness in my face was childish. I'd spent years telling my enemies that blame was pointless, that it didn't *change* anything. That it was whining to demand the world be as you thought it should instead of how it truly was. It'd been my answer, when facing Vivienne in Laure, and I would not renounce it now. The servants of the Gods Above had powers my decisions had barred from me, but that was my own doing. I did not surrender the right to restrain and work around these powers whenever I could, but I could not honestly call it *unfair*. When had fair ever mattered? That I had to refrain from using powers I had gained because they were harmful of dangerous in no way meant my enemies had limit themselves the same way. If I could not win with this state of affairs, that was on my head. There could be no such thing as cheating when none of this was a game. And Gods forgive me, but I'd known it would be like this when I took up the knife.

"Winner takes all," Archer said. "The law older than laws."

"I could probably end the war in about a year," I admitted. "If I hit Black's army in the back while it's defending against the crusaders, then help them move against Praes. There'd be a lot of death before it was over, taking Praesi cities, and probably just as much in purges afterwards. I'm not sure, though, that it won't result in fewer corpses than my way. *I genuinely can't tell*. If I threw it all away, if I rolled over for Hasenbach... Fuck, Callow wouldn't be independent but I broke William's neck because I believe the sign on the banner is less important than the people under it. I'm not after the same things I was when I started, not anymore. The amount of corpses on the ground at the end isn't all that matters."

"Never did get why you worry so much about people," Indrani said. "Vivienne's all about the good ol' motherland and getting even, but she was upper crust before she learned wandering hands. She's got a stake in that game. You? You're an orphan, Cat. Never left Laure before Black took you in, if Hakram is to be believed. Why do you give two shits if this country burns? Not like it ever did anything for you. A chunk of it still hates your guts, and considering you sure as Hells don't enjoy ruling it you're going through a lot of trouble to keep doing just that."

More than once I'd reflected that Archer had a lot in common with orcs, when it came to the way she looked at the world. I'd been wrong, though. Oh, they both liked blood on the floor and they measured most things through strength. But orcs had... loyalties. Not in the way I'd been taught to have them, but they were there. Follow the warlord, protect the clan, uphold what an orc should be. Indrani had none of that. If she was loyal to anything, it was herself. A betrayal, to her, would be forcing herself to do something she didn't want to do. Pretending to be something else than she was. Black and I were creatures fettered to outcomes, if not means. Archer, and Ranger as well I suspected, could not conceive a world where fetters could be anything but a sin. The only thing Indrani had it in her to truly hate was being restrained.

"I thought I could fix it," I quietly said. "I looked around me and thought that, if I had the power all those other people had, I wouldn't make their mistakes. I'd use it the way it should be used. That it would be *better*."

Archer studied me silently.

"And do you still?"

I made and broke the Liesse Rebellion, I thought. *I bargained with fae as my people died around me, failed the responsibilities I had claimed so grandly a city was blotted out from Creation along with a hundred thousand souls. I am leading this land to make war on half the continent while the rest plots my demise.*

"I'm not good enough a liar," I said, "to make myself believe that."

"So leave," Indrani said. "Take your cloak and your sword, wake Masego and convince Vivienne. You have a way with her. We can be out of the kingdom before dawn."

"Do you think we're good people, Indrani?" I asked.

"Good people is what we pretend to be, when we're more afraid of consequences than we are hungry or jealous," Archer replied without hesitation. "When the living is soft and someone else takes the pain for you. It always, always falls away when you walk through fire – and we've been in too many blazes to still be wearing that face."

"Right and wrong are less important than works or not," I mused. "That's what I was taught. And it fit, you know? Because mercy's the privilege of the powerful. The House of Light can speak the pretty sentiments because by following them it wins. Black never followed his philosophy to its logical conclusion, though, because it's not about logic for him. Not really. If the Heavens always win, why should anyone ever pick another side?"

"Gold, pretty boys, the power to fry anyone getting on your nerves," Indrani suggested. "Angels tend to be pricks, too. You're being all philosophical about this, but that's just you. Most people don't think that deep about it."

"The Empire of the last twenty years was probably the most reasonable Evil has ever been on this continent," I said. "It still involved exploiting an occupied country and habitual assassination. I don't think it was worse than other current nations, not objectively. But if the best Evil can do is acceptably awful, then some things have to be reconsidered. The Pilgrim said I'm leading everyone down the cliff just by being in charge, and just because he's trying to kill me doesn't mean he's *wrong*."

"So stab the Empress," Archer nonchalantly said, like it was just an afternoon's work. "Climb the Tower and, you know, don't do any of that."

"That's exactly what Diabolist is trying to get me to do," I murmured. "But I think it's a trap, Indrani. Because I'll have to get worse to stay on top in Praes. Below wins, and just because I'd hang the Heavens if I could doesn't meant I trust the opposition any. And whoever puts a knife in me, a few decades down the line, takes up the old banner with the scales having tilted their way. Pilgrim's right about that too. There's going to be consequences to all of this that won't come out for decades, and if I ignore that I'm fucking over a lot more people than I'm trying to save."

"You made part of this mess, can't deny that," Indrani said. "Promises too, to people you like. I won't pretend breaking would be pleasant. But this is larger and older than us, Cat. It's the Game of the Gods. Not playing is as close to victory as you'll ever get."

"If was a heroine," I said, "I'd tell you to have a war you need two sides."

"That ship sailed when you fucked over the Hashmallim, I'm pretty sure," Archer said.

I laughed ruefully, shaking my head.

"The last time I felt like I had a grasp on any of this was when I killed the Lone Swordsman," I admitted. "Ever since it's been like swimming in the dark. I know I saw a shore on the other side, but the night is young and I'm getting tired. The longer I'm at it, the more I doubt I'll ever get to land."

"And what's our shore?" Indrani asked.

"I call them," I softly said, "the Liesse Accords."

"They worth the swim?" Archer said, eyebrow quirking.

"They're why I still have a crown on," I replied. "Because for them to work, someone needs to enforce them from this side."

"So we fight," she said.

"So we fight," I echoed.

Silence lingered between us, almost restful.

"I'm not sure I do," I murmured. "Care. If I did, why would I need so many rules?"

"Same reason anyone has rules," Indrani replied, with kindness like a knife. "Fear."

I knew better, these days, than to argue with the truth. I rose to my feet and leaned over Masego, forcing away her feet and brushing the wooden slivers off his face.

"Wake me with dawn," I told her.

She nodded silently, blade beginning to chip at wood again. I laid my hand on Hierophant's head and breathed in, seizing his dream.

I never felt myself breathe out.

Chapter 19

Recovery

> "To seek to ascertain the worth of even a single a soul through morality is to force unnecessary mysticism onto a simple matter. As in all things, supply and demand determine the price."
>
> Extract from "Bought and Sold", a collection of the teachings of the Merchant Prince Irenos, founder of Mercantis

"I'll admit it," I said. "I was expecting a library."

My previous trips into dreamland had not led me to expect a great deal of nuance in the matter, though admittedly that'd been my own mind. Might just be that Masego was a little less straightforward in his way of looking at the world. The lack of swamp and shambling horde certainly implied as much. Instead Hierophant's dream was order gone mad. A pane of crystal under my feet, tethered to the centre of the massive structure by a long length of gold, kept me aloft. Unfortunately that did little to put my old fear of heights from rearing up its head. It was one thing to leap down from the sky when I knew my legs would unbreak themselves within moments, another to have only a thin sheet of crystal being the only thing keeping me from falling into endless void.

"Fucking Hells, Masego," I muttered. "Would it have killed you to put up a railing?"

Aside from the very real possibility of falling down forever, I had to concede there was a strange beauty to what I saw. It reminded me, in a way, of the depiction of astral spheres I'd once seen in Black's mansion in Ater. Though, instead of circling the sun the way mages had along ago proven Creation did, everything here was circling the sphere of shivering translucent flame held within a deep basin of gold. From it spanned long tubes of gold holding up lesser spheres all wildly different. Crystal and frost, roiling wind and swarms of small silver constructs. My own platform, like all the others, circled around the central sphere with a slow and measured ticking sound. I could glimpse gears and cranks beneath the basin that kept it all moving along. I shivered,

though there was no wind here. Perhaps *because* there was no wind. There was something subtly wrong about what lay before me, though I would not deny its eerie splendour. It was not a perspective, the way the cold machinery behind Black's eyes could be understood. It was...

"A way of understanding Creation," I finished out loud.

My voice felt dim and there was no echo. The void swallowed it all. My platform kept moving, and I shook myself out of the fugue. Odds were that I'd be able to find Masego within the sphere at the heart of this. I looked down at the gold support beam and winced. It was round, after all. If I slipped after making my way down... Well, I wasn't sure what the consequences of falling into the void would be, but considering Hierophant's mind was bound to have some very nasty defences I suspected it would not be pleasant. Not that my own little journey into Winter dreamland had been a treat. My fingers clenched. *Don't think about it*, I told myself. Winter had been trying to grind me down, by lingering on the remembrance I was only playing its game.

"So shimmying across that beam is a bit of a stretch," I decided. "That leaves trying to move from sphere to sphere."

I turned my gaze to the moving structures. While I couldn't discern the exact pattern yet – some beams extended at specific sections of the rotation, while others withdrew – I could at least grasp the likely length of the beams. And, more importantly, if one was ever going to come close enough for me to leap across. One, two, three – no, just two, that last one was moving back without warning and staying there. It'd have to do. I considered allowing a full rotation to take place just so I'd avoid running into any surprises, but there were no guarantees the pattern would remain the same every time. And, by the looks of it, this was going to take a while. Not all spheres were rotating at the same speed, but mine was fairly slow. Hard to properly measure time and distance in here, but I'd guess at least two hours for a full turn? Leaping uncertainly would be a risk, but so would be waiting that long when I was uncertain of the relative time flows in here and outside.

"I understand you're a man of deep and complex thought, Zeze, but you're not making this easy," I sighed. "You know what's the worst people have to deal with, in my mind? Condescension Queen and Lady Backstab. And that one endless horde of dead trying to kill them, but let's be honest – that's not exactly out of our wheelhouse."

I'd kind of expected one or both of the twins to materialize and mouth off after that, but I remained alone. Shame. Probably could have made rope out of intestines, maybe used bones for a hook. I paused.

"I'm not being unnecessarily gruesome there," I defensively told the void. "I don't know how to make rope out of hair, and to be solid enough to hold my weight skin would have to be tanned first."

Nothingness did not answer. Pointedly so, I felt.

"Well, fuck you too," I muttered.

It wasn't murder if they were projections of your unconscious mind, I comforted myself. Probably. I'd never looked up if the Empire had laws on the subject. Testing the platform beneath me, to my distaste I found it rather slippery. That was not going to be pleasant. I tried to see if Winter was willing to get involved, but I was reaching for nothing. No, I thought. Not nothing. It was just *distant*. Interesting, but it wasn't helping me in the slightest at the moment. The first outer sphere passed close after I spent half an eternity dawdling in the middle of nowhere, but I let that one pass. The sphere was wind and barely contained. Too much of a risk. The second rotated close after the rest of eternity passed me by, and I winced. Fire. Silver flames that flickered without a sound. Well, it wasn't going to be pleasant if I stumbled into those but it was still better than falling. The boots on my feet were old, nothing like those I now wore though I vaguely recalled having owned that pair before being apprenticed to Black. The wiggle room for my toes was nice, but the softness of used leather less so. I had to balance my weight carefully when I took a running start.

"Nonononono-" I valiantly screamed, realizing with horror halfway through the leap that the sphere was withdrawing.

I had no power to call on, no mantle or Name that could save my hide at the last moment. The stark understanding of my helplessness brought back something I'd begun to forget – fear. Not the dim worry for events yet to come that haunted my every hour since I'd taken the crown, but the colder thing that was having to look death in the eyes. I twisted forward, and my fingers caught the edge of the platform. My life was not owed to my own merits. The sphere had just withdrawn only slightly.

"Oh Hells," I panted, forcing my other hand to clench so the trembling would stop while I brought it up to clasp the platform's edge.

I felt sweat drenching my back, another sensation I'd near forgotten. My palms were growing moist as well, and that was a lot worrying since they were the only thing between me and falling.

"Godsdamnit, Masego," I said. "Godsfucking-"

I took a deep breath, then pulled myself up with grunt of effort. It was awkward, and my palm slipped when I got my leg over the ledge. I ended up falling awkwardly on the side, rolling in panic towards the fire to avoid the fall. Wait, had there really been enough –

The Conjurer was an utter fool, yet somehow he still lived despite Masego's best efforts. His lips twisted into a sneer and he traced Form and Force, weaving the formula his words shaped through them. Air clustered into three arithmetically perfect spheres and shot forward, though in his irritation he had allowed the proper angle to /

Seven full months had he studied the theory. It was the simplest working he knew, transmutation of power into heat and light, yet his every deviation from the original formula to craft his own had resulted in failure. The numbers were perfect, he knew it, but somehow the spell would not /

"We're not bleeding people, Apprentice," she said accusingly. "We're not that desperate." He blinked, more out of sheer affront than surprise. What kind of a blunderer did she take him for? He opened his mouth to snap /

– I rolled out of the silver flames, my body shivering. That had felt… I patted my own stomach, reassured to find it flat. For a moment there'd been a disconnect and I'd expected to find otherwise. I closed my eyes and laid there for a moment before slapping my own face with an open palm. The sting snapped me out of it and I dragged myself into a crouch.

"Memories?" I murmured, glancing at the sphere.

Maybe. I'd felt genuinely nettled throughout all three glimpses. The third time had even been directed at myself, which was giving me a headache since his recollection of that conversation was a lot more vivid than my own. There'd been a common thread. It might be the same for every sphere, a sort of archive. Gods, his mind was so weird. I was starting to feel a lot better about the murder swamp in my own. I shook myself out of the trance. The rotation had continued while I was elsewhere, and for longer than I'd thought. I couldn't even see the crystal platform I'd started on anymore. Still, screwed as that had been I was in a much better position now. There were twice as many spheres circling close to this one than there'd been for the last, and I picked on that looked like an orb of pure white marble for my second leap. There was no nasty halfway surprise this time. Time was hard to gauge, in here, but by my fourth leap I felt like I'd made some decent progress. I was more than halfway through, though difficulties had come with the advance. This close to the centre of the structure the spheres moved a lot quicker. And, I saw with a frown, the platforms around them were smaller. Not a lot of room for mistakes there.

I bid my time, reluctantly, until I picked one out whose rotation seemed steady and the sphere on it not too dangerous. A slower one passed by, but I wasn't going anywhere near something that looked like a hole of darkness sucking in everything if I could help it. A constantly moving jigsaw of ivory wasn't honestly much better, I'd admit to myself, but at this point there was only so much pickiness I could afford. With another heroically shrill scream I leapt, and it went perfectly. Angle and swiftness, all aligned as they should be. Then my boot touched the crystal, and with a sinking feeling I realized it was rough instead of smooth. Which wouldn't have been much of a problem if I'd adjusted my stance before jumping. I had not. I stumbled with all the grace of cart rolling down a hill, my forehead going into-

He did not understand why the orc kept seeking his company, though as long as he came with a shatranj board Masego would not refuse the company. Campaigning, much as Father had implied, was a dull thing to suffer through. It was only when Hakram sat across him, sliding open the shutters holding the pieces, that he realized he'd been awaiting Adjutant. That he had no ceased his dissection earlier because there was nothing more to learn from the subject, but because he'd been looking forward to their evening game. "White?" Hakram offered and /

"It's a sprite," Archer said, shaking the glass bottle. He'd known at a glance, of course, and the angry buzzing of the lesser spirit indicated displeasure at the rough handling. "I am not unfamiliar with them," Masego replied. "They are quite common in western Callow." The strange woman chuckled, tossing the bottle into his lap. He hastily grabbed it. "Magelight's supposed to be hard on the eyes," Archer said. "If you're going to keep reading after dark, use that instead." He started in surprise. Had she caught it for him? Why would she /

"They were the rooms of the Wizards of the West, you know," Thief said, leaning against the threshold. Masego did not quite succeed at hiding his start. She'd emerged without warning, as was her wont. Not even Summer's light cast a shadow on her aspect. His eyes swept across the room, finding only furniture and a bath in the Soninke manner. "There is no trace of their presence," he informed the woman. She shrugged. "Figured as much," Thief said. "But there's old stories about the location making it easier to align with 'otherworldly powers'. Thought you might want to have a look." The tone was defensive, he was certain. It held all the right markers. Did /

My face was less than an inch away from shifting ivory as I balanced uneasily on my feet. The roof of my mouth was dry. I licked my lips, retreating half a step. That'd been much more intense than the last. More nuanced as well. I'd felt the confusion shifting to understanding like it was my own. I still remembered what it felt like, people's faces being so hard to read. Was that how he felt all the time? I'd thought he was uncomfortable with touching because it was the way Warlock had raised him, but that hadn't been the way at all. I just... hadn't known what the touching was for, and I'd hesitated to act until I could correctly identify the reason. It'd been like living a world full of masks, so very few of which I could read. Slowly I calmed down. Touching my face helped, the touch of my own fingers on my own flesh. I didn't even bother to assess how much time had passed, since I already knew I wouldn't like the answer. The spheres moved, but I waited patiently for my openings. Another two leaps, and as I stood besides a sphere of lightning-infused amber I timed my last one.

I'd underestimated how massive the central sphere truly was. At least as large as the royal palace in Laure, and the gold basin that held it was even larger. The trembling translucent flame in front of me was unlike the other globes I'd encountered. It was not full, only a thin barrier. Through it I could make out lights and shapes, some still and others in movement. Steeling myself, I marched through. Heat licked at my skin, ignoring my clothes, but there was no rush of foreign memories. Inside the sphere, as I had thought, Masego awaited. He was far from the only thing in there. Constellations of instruments of all kinds filled the firmament of this place, gold and silver and obsidian and a hundred other tools – some I had seen before, others never even imagined existed. They all clustered around Hierophant, who stood with his back to me as he studied something I could not make out.

"Distraction," Masego said absent-mindedly. "Kill it."

The only other living entity in the sphere moved. I looked back at my own face, my twin snorting and unsheathing her sword. Not my twin, I thought. She didn't wear the same clothes as me, neither in this place nor back in Creation. She wore the same plate I had that day when we fought the Princess of High Noon, and her smile was too broad to be entirely human. It was a caricature of daring and insolence, not something lips could actually do.

"Masego," I called out.

"Ah, apologies," he replied patiently. "*Please* kill it."

Flicker.

The other Catherine was no longer that. Archer idly nocked an arrow, the boundary between her scarf and her face blurred. Her appearance was even stranger than my not-twin's had been. She was less detailed, like a rough painting of herself. It was when the string went as furthest back as it could that she sharpened, and in that moment she was *stunning*. The hungry gleam in the eyes, the easy arrogance in her stance. She wasn't more beautiful than the real Indrani was, but there was an *intensity* to her that I'd never seen in Archer. Like she was leaving an indelible mark on this moment. The surprise of it slowed me down, and throwing myself to the ground did not help quite enough. The arrow went through my chest and I grunted in pain.

Flicker.

Adjutant slowly spun his axe as he advanced towards me. More statue than orc, all that he was set in stone. The weight of his presence was feather-light, at first, but the longer it was there the heavier it bore down on me. He bared fangs of carved bone as too-clever eyes followed my rising to my feet. The eyes were the most expressive part of this statue of Hakram, inhumanly perceptive. As if they were the only living part of him. I broke the arrow's shaft, biting my lip to avoid screaming.

"Hakram," I said. "Don't do it."

He kept advancing.

"Hakram," I barked. "I *order* you to desist."

Still advancing. Fuck.

"Masego," I screamed, and then not-Hakram was upon me.

The moment he struck, he was a statue no longer. He turned into flesh and blood, strength uncoiling like a trebuchet released. I tried to catch his wrist, but I might as well have been wrestling that trebuchet. He smashed me into the ground effortlessly, painfully jarring the arrowhead still in my chest.

"Zeze," I yelled. "Don't you-"

"Wait," Masego said.

The entity froze, axe a hair's breadth away from my throat. Hierophant turned, and I grimaced at the sight. No blindfold on his face, i here. Hollow burnt-out sockets studied me, balls of Summer flame hovering within.

"I know you," he said.

"Catherine," I reminded him. "Your friend."

He frowned. His face blurred, then became calm again.

"Are you quite certain?" he asked.

Shit. He doesn't remember anything that's in the spheres outside, does he? I had no idea how much of the man I knew was standing in front of me.

"Masego, you need to wake up," I said. "I came here to get you back."

"Don't be absurd," he chided me. "There is so much left to study."

He gestured towards the thing his body had been hiding and my eyes widened. It was a sphere like those outside, though much smaller. The ball of Light was wriggling violently, a wound in it kept open by silver pincers.

"It is much clearer, without the noise," Hierophant told me. "We are making great progress."

I forced a smile.

"That's good," I said. "Tell me more about that. I want to see. But I'll need to get up, for that, and there's a blade at my throat."

Flicker.

I saw Thief's face, for a heartbeat, and then the entity was gone. Masego was gesturing.

"Come, come," he said. "You're familiar with the Ligurian theory of magic, of course."

I got up, hand on my throat.

"Of course," I lied. "It's my favourite."

He offered a beaming smile. His face blurred and he was calm again.

"You're not trying to trick me, are you?" he asked.

"Of course not," I hastily replied. "I uh, just really hate the Jaquinite theory."

Gods, I really should have listened more closely when he talked about that. Was being an occasionally shitty friend going to get me killed? That'd be fitting piece of irony.

"As you should," Hierophant sniffed. "Procerans. Their idea of a proper formula is to get down on their knees and *pray*."

"Just the worst," I agreed, slowly coming closer.

He gestured again for me to stand by his side.

"Now, the Gigantes do shroud their sorcery behind unnecessary claptrap," he lectured. "But I believe Gharan the Wise was correct when he theorized they are the eldest race on Calernia to have developed a comprehensive method for use of the Gift."

"Only makes sense," I said.

I was close enough to knife him, now, but would that actually help? Academic question anyway, I didn't have a knife and not-Thief could be anywhere. I glanced at the sphere he was inviting me to watch, and my vision swam. I could almost make out something. A memory, though I didn't live it like the others. Marchford. Night, with hundreds of columns of fire moving according to my will. A ritual repurposed, my first real stride towards understanding the deeper mysteries of High Arcana. I closed my eyes.

"You were the Apprentice, then," I said.

"Just a title," he dismissed. "As milestone that denotes understanding reached, but of little practical worth."

"You're not anymore, though," I said. "You're the Hierophant. How did that happen?"

A little heavy-handed, but I had a lot of detachment to bludgeon through here. Subtle wasn't going to work. Masego smiled. His face blurred. He was furious.

"Distraction," he said. "Unimportant."

"Name transition isn't important?" I probed. "How often have you seen that phenomenon?"

His face blurred, returned to calm. I'd survive to hear a reply, then. Apparently improving one's vocabulary really *was* a life-saving skill, who knew?

"Not enough," he said. "But it is all contaminated. Too much bias. Not enough left to examine after removal."

"Oh, that's all right then," I shrugged.

He nodded, pleased at my agreement.

"Difficult research isn't for everyone," I continued. "I'm sure someone will eventually get around to explaining it to you."

His face darkened.

"I do not need to depend on the findings of others," he said.

"Obviously you have to," I said. "I mean, you're just not capable enough to study it with the bias intact. You've said it yourself, it's too much."

I would have felt a lot worse about trying to trick him in this state if he hadn't ordered me shot moments ago. Hierophant dismissed the sphere of Light with a wave of the hand, and reached out. Plucking out a distant sphere of water in a way that should not have been physically possible, he set it in front of us.

"It can be done," he insisted. "Simply a matter of discipline."

"I look forward to your findings, then," I smiled.

His face blurred, and remained that way.

"You interfere with the process," he said in an utterly flat voice.

"I would never," I said and snatched his hand, forcing it into the sphere.

White light, blinding. A knife going through my back.

"No," Hierophant's voice barked. "No, *go away*. Catherine?"

I dropped down on my knees. Was that blood in my mouth? Fuck, it was just a stabbing. Thief was nowhere that good at killing people, I called bullshit. The spots went away and I looked at Masego's mortified face.

"Hey, Zeze," I grunted. "Been a while."

"Cat," he murmured. "You're – no, doesn't matter. I can end it."

His fingers threaded through mine, softly, and as he squeezed we woke.

Chapter 20

Onset

> "Proceran promises should be treated like stew: unless you know every ingredient, best not swallow."
>
> King Charles Fairfax of Callow, the Rightfully Wary

Archer's elbow was pressing into my eye. I blinked and craned back my neck before she could smack me again, turning in the bed. I carefully extracted myself from the pile of limbs over me, careful not to wake either of them. It was easier than I'd thought, since somewhat unsurprisingly Indrani was hogging the covers. Masego was laying back with his face towards the ceiling, still like he'd been put to rest in a coffin instead of passing out by my side when we came back from his mind. The eye cloth had been tugged down at some point, baring an eerie glass eye and partly covering one of his cheeks. I wrinkled my nose. Archer reeked of yesterday's fighting, so clearly she'd not bothered to clean up before piling on top of us. She murmured in her sleep in a tongue I'd didn't recognize, then promptly spread her legs where I'd been before. She was not, I noted with amusement, granting Masego any more room in the process. If anything she was coming closer to edging him off the bed.

I'd not taken off my tunic before falling asleep last night – and it still surprised me I'd felt the need to sleep at all – but I sat to pull on my boots. I splashed my face with the water basin more out of habit than any real need, the tepid liquid doing nothing to wake me up. A dreamless night, huh. Been a while since I'd had one of those. I made my way out of the tent quietly, stretching my frame when the sun bore down on me. If felt *rested*. Like I'd been tired and no longer was. It was a small pleasure I allowed myself a moment to properly savour. The Army of Callow's camp was only beginning to wake, dawn fresh to the sky, and I wouldn't truly be needed for at least an hour. If Hakram were around there'd be a meal waiting for me somewhere, along with the night's reports, but he was very far away. Last I'd heard he was bringing the latest recruits up Quicksilver River, intending to link up with Kegan's host before joining us.

The camp fire closest to my tent was deserted save for a single person, tending to a kettle hung over the flames. I didn't need to look twice to recognize Vivienne. She did not turn, though I was certain she'd heard me approach, instead putting down a pair of cups on a flat stone and reaching for the kettle. I raised an eyebrow. The twin bells set on silver made it pretty clear where she'd gotten those. Had she nabbed old Fairfax dinner sets? I smothered a fond smile. Of course she had. Why would even bother to ask? I dropped down at her side, glimpsing the leaves inside the cups. Tea, though not the Praesi stuff. Smelled... Ashuran, maybe? Wasn't the stuff Aisha got imported from across the Tyrian Sea anyway. Wordlessly, she poured the boiling water into them without spilling a drop. I claimed one, inhaling the scent. I tended to enjoy that more than the drink itself.

"I hope that was part of the tenth," I said. "If there's silver missing, the palace seneschal is going to be pissed."

Thief smiled, using a long spoon of silver to stir her tea.

"Stealing from the palace is a hanging offence," she said.

"Not since we revoked Mazus' decrees," I objected. "It's a whipping and a fine now, I think?"

"As Her Majesty says," Vivienne drawled.

She'd never actually denied it, had she? I sighed.

"All right," I said. "You were waiting for me. Out with it."

"We'll be sitting with the Procerans at noon," she replied before taking a sip from her cup. "Addressing our diplomatic approach is in order."

I hummed, inhaling the fragrant steam again.

"Our strategic objectives are still more or less the same as when we started to march," I said. "We need them on the other side of the passage, and to stay there long enough we have breathing room to refit while we prepare our next move. Coin too, if possible. I doubt they'll agree to actualt war indemnities, so we'll have to get that through the supplies if we get it at all."

"I've been in contact with the Observatory," Vivienne said. "The situation abroad is evolving."

"The Dominion's armies should be in southern Procer, by now," I said. "But I'm guessing there's more to tell."

"Klaus Papenheim has finally begun his offensive in the Red Flower Vales," my spymistress said. "No word as to the results of the first battles yet, but the Carrion Lord seems to be holding."

I grimaced.

"He'd better," I said. "If the crusaders punch through, our army's in no shape to take them on."

"I've also had word from Praes, though the news is a fortnight old," Vivienne said. "Nok was sacked by the Ashuran war fleet."

I let out a low whistle. I wasn't exactly pleased at the loss of life that'd be involved there, but it was an impressive achievement for the Thalassocracy nonetheless. Praesi cities were layered with centuries of wards and sorcery,

not to mention the pack of horrors the aristocrats kept bound in the basement for rainy days. I'd known the Ashurans weren't exactly pushovers, considering they had the largest fleet in Calernia, but most their wars had been fought at sea. Last large-scale engagement I could recall they'd fought on land was when they'd landed armies to help Levant rise against the Principate, and it'd been the incipient Dominion that'd done the heavy lifting there.

"They withdrew after?" I asked.

"Set half the city on fire in the process, after looting it," Vivienne said. "The Wasteland legions arrived two days too late to help with the defence. The Empress is taking a beating at court over it. Thalassina's threatened to rebel if they don't get a Legion garrison. "

"Whoever's in charge of the fleet isn't a fool," I mused. "Nok's the easiest target in the Empire, relatively speaking. They spent most their history under the thumb of one city or another. It's nowhere as crucial to Praes as Thalassina, but they made the Tower bleed. All the wolves will be drawn out by the scent of it."

"I would not wager that the Empress is too preoccupied to sabotage us if she so wishes," Thief said. "But the real pivot remains the battle in the Vales."

"You think Milenan and Malanza will want to stretch the diplomacy out until they know the outcome down south," I frowned.

"If the Carrion Lord is driven back, their negotiating position significantly improves," Vivienne noted. "If he wins, they are no longer sole bearers of the shame of defeat should they make bargain with us. From their perspective, delay has no drawback."

"Except for starving," I said.

She nodded, sipping at her cup.

"I would expect Prince Milenant to state the ongoing continuation of yesterday's arrangement is a condition for continuing to negotiate," Vivienne said. "Something along the lines of coercion souring the process of peacemaking."

"I've got no reason to – ah," I said. "They'll fold early on something major, then argue I'm negotiating in bad faith if I'm not willing to agree."

"Precisely," she said.

"We're not even peacemaking, not really," I sighed. "They don't have the authority to call off the Tenth Crusade. The most we can get is a very narrow truce that doesn't violate the letter of Proceran laws on contributing to crusades."

"It would be reputational disaster for them to agree to even that much without something to show for their retreat," Vivienne said. "We'll need to give them something."

"I can't move on them having a presence on our side of the passage," I stated flatly. "You know very well how much trouble that'd be for us."

She shook her head.

"Their ambitions to expand into Callow are checked, for the moment," she said. "I find it dubious they will attempt to overturn that state of affairs given

their weak position. What they need, Catherine, is a way to save face. A way to accept terms that will not make them pariahs in the Highest Assembly."

"Reputation, huh," I mused.

I drank from the tea, though its pleasant fragrance did not extend to the taste in my mouth. Whether it was eating or drinking, the enjoyable parts of it were mostly gone.

"The way I see it, what they're most afraid of back home is Hasenbach," I finally said. "It's horrible for their reputation to make a deal with me, but won't see them overthrown. The First Prince, though, she'll toss their asses out in the cold if she has half an excuse."

"It would greatly consolidate her hold on Procer if the largest opposition bloc was publicly disgraced," Vivienne agreed. "Your point?"

"We hand them a way to kick the mess upstairs," I said, eyes narrowing as I stared into the flames. "Like you said, they don't have the authority to negotiate for the entire crusade. Just themselves. So if they're presented with something they can't accept or refuse without Hasenbach..."

"It is her reputation at stake, not theirs," Vivienne mused.

I set down the cup.

"I think it's time we brought Aisha in on this," I said. "Unless you became fluent in Proceran legalities since we last spoke."

She rolled her eyes. That was a no, then. With a groan, I got up. Time to get to work.

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Seven tenths of diplomacy, as far as I could tell, was bickering over symbolic or largely irrelevant details. We wasted a full hour trading envoys with the crusaders just to the order the issues would be addressed in. That and the language that would be used for the negotiations. They pushed for Chantant, but I was having none of that. My knowledge of it wasn't good enough for easy conversation, and I wasn't using a translator for something this important when nearly all the opposite royalty could speak Lower Miezan without trouble. I folded on it being their pavilion and tables we met at, then conceded to their proposal of only twenty attendants in exchange for picking the tongue andthe first issue. At least Aisha managed to horse-trade the give on attendants for a limitation on the number of attending heroes. Five was more than I wanted, but there was no realistic chance of the Pilgrim and his sharpest knives not being at the table. All of the Woe save for Hakram would be attending, regardless, so I wasn't feeling overly cornered when it came to the balance of Named power.

My delegation ended up split more or less half and half between Praesi and Callowans. For my homeland the two heavyweights were Grandmaster Brandon Talbot and Baroness Ainsley Morley of – currently occupied – Harrow. I wasn't eager to involve the latter, since she was not a well-known quantity, but it wasn't feasible not to. She was the ranking noble in my army and her holdings would be a point of negotiation. Even if it wouldn't have been a grave insult to keep her away from the table, I would have involved her. Baroness

Ainsley had already proved she wanted to look after her people. She deserved a seat, no matter my personal misgivings. On the Praesi side, the most important were Marshal Juniper of Callow and Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara. The latter had picked out everyone else in our delegation save for the Woe, keeping the balance between provenances while digging out the scribes and learned officers that served as the closest thing the Kingdom of Callow currently had to trained diplomats.

The Proceran delegation was, in comparison, a gallery of royalty. Prince Amadis and Princess Rozala had always been a given, but there were a full six crowned heads in attendance. Thief provided names and sparse details quietly. Prince Arnaud of Cantal, by reputation a loudmouthed idiot. Princess Adeline of Orne, whose brother and predecessor had been killed at Black's orders. Prince Alejandro of Segovia, who'd publicly broken with his mother's old alliance with Hasenbach. Prince Louis of Creusens, allegedly so badly in debt to Amadis he couldn't even take a piss without the older man's permission. Save for the heroes, the other attendants were all kinsmen to one royal or another. It was the Named I studied most closely. The Grey Pilgrim's face was the usual serene mask but there were younger heroes with him. The sorcerer I'd fought before, which formal introductions revealed to be Rogue Sorcerer. A woman bearing sword and board and watching me unblinkingly was introduced as the Silent Guardian, while the woman with the red face paint I'd once cut the arm of was the Painted Knife. The last was the Forsworn Healer, and I frowned at the sight of him.

No Saint. That was only half a relief. If she was here, she'd be trouble but I'd at least know where she was for sure. I glanced at the heroes, frown deepening. Silent Guardian to hold me, Painted Knife to check Thief and the Sorcerer to delay Masego. The Healer to keep them going, and the Pilgrim to tip the scales. The five heroes had been chosen so they'd be able to hold up against the Woe in a fight. *But if they think it's going to turn to violence, why is the Saint not here?*

"... and Her Majesty, Queen Catherine of Callow, First of Her Name," Aisha finished, and I offered a polite nod to the Procerans watching me.

There'd been a Catherine Alban that served as queen regent for her son, actually, but by Callowan tradition that did not count as reigning precedent. Prince Amadis took a seat first. At the centre of his side of the table, before I did. The etiquette of that was against him – as the ruling sovereign of a nation, I had the highest status here and none should be seated before me. I didn't feel particularly insulted, on a personal level, but it was an insult. Offered right after the introductions. While I was less than invested in etiquette, I was invested in this negotiation not being a complete shitshow. So, as Prince Amadis leaned back into his seat, I met his eyes. Silence stretched under the silken pavilion. Slowly, I cocked an eyebrow.

"I was under the impression Arlesites were a mannerly people," I said, then waited a beat. "Your Grace."

I let another moment pass before sitting down and gesturing for my entire delegation to do the same, regardless of the higher status of the royals on the other side.

"You have a reputation for preferring familiar manners, Your Majesty," the Prince of Iserre smiled. "I apologize if offense was taken."

I did not think it a coincidence that *familiarity breeds contempt* was a common saying in both our homelands. Procerans had a reputation for being able to speak flowery flattery while meaning the opposite that was apparently well-earned.

"With friends, certainly," I smiled back as the Proceran delegation sat in proper order. "Are we friends now, Prince Amadis?"

"Rulers sharing an alignment of interests, mayhaps," the older man said, his Lower Miezan without trace of accent. "Yet is that not the cradle of all great friendships?"

I inclined my head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. I flicked a glance at the heroes, which were all seated at the left edge of the table save for the Pilgrim. He was at Malanza's side, between her and the Prince of Cantal. Aisha made up my right side, Thief my left. Rank had not been the prime consideration in those arrangements.

"Before beginning, I believe it necessary for the nature of the involvement of your Named to be clarified," I said.

Aisha's notion. Prince Amadis had been introduced as the head of the Proceran delegation, as we'd expected, but the status of the heroes today was vague. Legally speaking, anyway. Several of them weren't even Proceran, and those that were should have no authority to speak of if this was considered a negotiation between Proceran royalty and the Queen of Callow. If it was a conference between representatives of the Tenth Crusade and a villain queen, however, that was a whole other matter. My Staff Tribune had predicted it would be the latter and not the former – otherwise they'd have no legal authority to stand on without the permission of the First Prince and the other sovereigns at the head of the crusade.

"The Chosen have graced us with their presence in an advisory role," Prince Amadis replied.

Good, I thought. Then it was the Prince of Iserre and his fellows I had to settle with, not representatives of the Heavens. We had, at least, the legal prerequisites for any treaty made here to be binding. Not that it assured the deal would be respected. Aisha had reluctantly informed me that the most prominent precedent for treaties between Procerans and an Evil polity was attempts at deals with the Kingdom of the Dead – which were broken by either side as often as not. There were treaties with Helike as well, but none relevant since the League of Free Cities had been founded. It would be shaky grounds to try using those as a yardstick. I nodded at Aisha, who bowed deep in her seat and addressed the table with a graceful smile.

"We would now open formal negotiations between the Kingdom of Callow and the lawful leadership of the invading army currently standing on its sovereign territory," she said.

There were too many people for me to watch them all, so I kept my gaze on the two I knew best: Amadis and Rozala. The Prince of Iserre's friendly smile did not waver in the slightest, but Malanza's brow twitched. Not pleased. The language as presented by Aisha treated the crusaders coming here like any other foreign invasion, the kind the Principate had tried for centuries with various degrees of success. It stripped the Procerans of the handy excuse of 'the Heavens told me to', which might allow them to wiggle out some responsibility for their actions. They weren't going to accept that, of course. But now the bargaining started. Prince Amadis glanced at one of his diplomats, the middle-aged man bowing just as deep before responding.

"We cannot treat in good faith under these terms," the man replied. "We can, however open formal negotiations between the Praesi vassal state of Callow and the mandated expeditionary force of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer."

Not presenting themselves as crusaders, but still as being here on Hasenbach's orders. I kept a frown off my face. They knew we weren't going to accept Callow being termed as a vassal state, since they'd effectively be making a deal with the Tower by intermediary if we did. I was fairly sure they could break any terms made if ordered to do so by the First Prince, if it unfolded like that, since the Highest Assembly had formally passed a motion to declare a crusade against Praes and a vassal state would be considered within the scope of that. It went back and forth for a while, until something like a compromise was reached: negotiations were now being held between the Queen in Callow and the mandated expeditionary force of the First Prince. Aisha had tried for Queen *of* Callow, but they'd gotten out of that by pointing out that unless the Highest Assembly passed a motion or Hasenbach recognized it by decree, they couldn't legally recognize Callow as a sovereign state with me as its ruler.

Legitimacy was the issue here. My only claim to the throne was conquest, really, and even that was a little iffy. As it stood the treaty would still be binding, theoretically speaking, but it was made with me as an entity and not Callow itself. It became worthless ink if someone put my head on a pike. Thief flicked me an unsurprised look after, having predicted the implication of the other part of the terms. The Procerans, by presenting themselves as an expeditionary force, were paving the grounds for any bill incurred over supplies to be sent to Hasenbach's court instead of coming out of their own pockets. I sincerely doubted that Cordelia would flip me so much as a copper if anything less than an oath to the Heavens was involved, so we'd have to get creative about getting the coin if we were going to get any at all. Still, that they were trying to extricate from this at all meant they were taking the process seriously. A good sign, after that tumultuous opening. I caught the subtle movement of Prince Amadis' hand before anyone else on my side.

"The delegation recognizes the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim, formal advisor to the Prince of Iserre," the middle-aged diplomat announced.

The old man rose to his feet.

"I seek clarification from the Queen in Callow," he said calmly, "on matters of intent."

I looked up and fought back a sigh.

Wasn't it traditional that things had to at least go *well* for the villain before the tables were turned?

Chapter 21

Tug-of-War

> "Invading Callow is much like drunkenly playing dice: the odds are never as good as you believe, and you know you've reached bottom when snake eyes are involved."
>
> Dread Emperor Malevolent III, the Pithy

I pricked my ears, gauging the enemy. Most of the Proceran delegation had either skipped a beat or seen their pulse quicken when the Pilgrim rose to his feet. That was telling. Since it was dubious anyone that high up in the Proceran pecking order was faint of heart, the implication was that this particular play had been kept close to the chest. There were only four who'd not had a physical reaction of fear or surprise: Prince Amadis, Princess Rozala, Prince Arnaud and the middle-aged diplomat who'd been the mouthpiece for the opposition so far. The first two were only to be expected, and the last a given, but the third? That was interesting. Arnaud of Cantal did not strike me as the kind of man the other two royals would keep deep in their confidence. Has he found out on his own? If he was spying on the leaders of the northern crusade, that was a possible angle for Thief to exploit. Turning him seemed unlikely, but if his spying apparatus could be infiltrated... Something to discuss with her later. I made a note to have Vivienne dig deeper into the man, as there was apparently more to him than his reputation. The Grey Pilgrim's words were followed by heavy silence and I did not hurry to respond.

This, I knew, was the beginning of the deeper game. The war behind the war, where Named would claw at each other like animals to get the morsels of narrative they needed for the final victory. The thing was, as it stood, I was winning that fight. I'd repeatedly made overtures for peace, brought up whenever I could that the enemy was invading my homeland for mostly petty reasons and avoided – as much as feasible – falling into the kind of villainous stand that would get me winning in the short term and killed in the long one. As long as this remained a negotiation between mortals, for mortal motives, I came out ahead. Sure, they were a better hand at diplomacy and likely I'd

end up unable to capitalize on several of my advantages. But that was fine, in the greater scheme of things, so long as I walked out of this pavilion with some gains and my narrative intact. There were earthly logistics to this, and Black had made an entire career out of proving those could win a war regardless of the subtler workings of Creation, but I was confident that as long as I held my ground story-wise I'd emerge in a position to begin the sequence of events that'd get me to my objective.

Which meant that I had to avoid engaging the Pilgrim as much as I could. I had a knack for stories, twisting them and using them. It came naturally to me. But the opposition had actually *lived* through hundreds of them. The experience gap between us was overwhelming, and that was without even taking into consideration whatever tricks the Heavens were sure to have bestowed upon him to make sure he'd keep coming out ahead. I could not confidently state I would win against the Grey Pilgrim, so my safest path was not to fight him at all. Ironically, my sharpest tool in ensuring that was something I generally had little patience for: etiquette. Instead of replying to the old Levantine, I leaned towards Aisha.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said. "But isn't it a severe breach of decorum for someone without a formal role in negotiations to directly address a queen?"

The lovely Taghreb's lips quirked.

"That is so," she said, pitching her voice so it would be heard by all. "Under Tower law, such a transgression is punishable by flaying of the left hand and foot."

Several of the Procerans' hearts quivered.

"It has been the stance of your delegation to advance the Queen in Callow as an entity separate from the Tower's rule," the Pilgrim said, face serene. "Was this a misrepresentation?"

I did one the things I hated most in the world: I kept my fucking mouth shut. The moment I got involved the narrative was back in play. *Lose*, I told myself. *Let him win the small things, so long as you get what you came for.*

"Observations on the nature of Praesi law are no admission of anything else," Thief coldly noted. "To pretend otherwise is disingenuous, and might be taken as an attempt to sink honest negotiations. Is that the intent of the Proceran delegation?"

I sat straighter in my chair. Thief was one of the Woe, and the Woe were under me. Would anything coming out of her mouth contribute to the tapestry the Pilgrim was trying to weave? Not if I contradicted her, I suspected, but if I was remaining silent... Best to stay on the safe side. Picking out a sliver of Winter, I formed a ring around her index on the hand beneath the table and squeezed it lightly. She inclined her head slightly to the left, acknowledging my warning as I allowed the construct to dissipate.

"A curious thing, that seeking clarity would be taken as offence," the Pilgrim said. "Regardless, there is precedent."

The Proceran mouthpiece bowed again.

"As far as the year seventy-four, Chosen recognized as titled advisors have been allowed to address to the Highest Assembly directly," the man said. "As far one hundred and eleven, the same have been granted right of involvement with negotiations held with foreign powers."

Seventy-four, huh. That was the year eight hundred ninety, by the Imperial calendar – Procerans begun theirs after the founding of the Principate, which had only taken place a year after Triumphant's fall. Considering the current Imperial year was thirteen hundred and twenty-seven, that was not a young precedent. It shouldn't matter, though, and if I'd picked up on that, Aisha should have as well. Living up to my expectation, the Staff Tribune advanced where we remained silent.

"Proceran custom is not universally binding," she pointed out. "There is no such precedent for our delegation. Regardless, right of involvement would not equate right of *interrogation*."

The middle-aged diplomat smothered a smile. A mistake had been made.

"Queen Eleanor Fairfax granted privilege to voice thoughts and questions freely to the contemporary Wizard of the West, after her coronation," the man said. "This is a matter of public record. That privilege has been maintained through every known Choosing since."

I kept my face rigid. Was that true? It might very well be. Records were sparse about the Old Kingdom, nowadays, save those that related to mundane matters – where the Empire's rule tended to come out as a more prosperous, if also more tyrannical, alternative. My teacher had been thorough in taking the knife to anything that could feasibly become fodder for a hero's rise, and knowledge about past Wizards of the West would have been high on that list of proscriptions. *Except he wouldn't have been able expunge Proceran records, not in depth anyway.* The man's heartbeat was steady, which could be an indication he was telling the truth – or merely that he was a very good liar.

"The Proceran delegation has not recognized ours as being representative of the Kingdom of Callow," Grandmaster Talbot said, cool voice cutting clearly through the hesitation. "Only of the Queen in Callow, making such precedent irrelevant. Which it would be even if otherwise, unless by some labyrinthine exercise of reason an equivalence between the attempted murderer of Queen Catherine and the ancient servants of the now-extinct House Fairfax was established. Which it was not."

Brandon *fucking* Talbot, I thought, smothering a grin. Riding in lance high at the last moment, proper knight that he was.

"Lack of recognition for Proceran law endangers the entire process of treaty-making," the middle-aged diplomat warned.

"Forceful imposition of foreign customs on the same process is not a standard this delegation is willing to establish," Aisha replied pleasantly. "We do not recognize the attempt to establish precedent by the Proceran delegation, and move the first issue on the program should now be addressed."

"Is this to be who you truly are, Catherine Foundling?" the Grey Pilgrim said, soft voice carrying across the pavilion. "A villain hiding behind petty excuses, unwilling to even speak with those you deem foes?"

My fingers clenched. The fucker. He had a lot of nerves saying that, after he'd tacitly allowed the Saint to try to kill me under a godsdamned truce banner. I leaned forward to – *let him win the small things, so long as you get what you came for*. My teeth came down and I bit off my tongue, knowing I would not be able to keep silent otherwise. If Masego's weakness was the need for utter precision, then mine was the inability to just keep my fucking mouth shut. Blood filled my mouth as Winter lazily coursed through my veins, repairing the self-inflicted damage. I swallowed as discretely as I could. The violent urge to respond was not gone, but the immediacy had ebbed. I kept my eyes on Prince Amadis, who was eyeing me with a mixture of disgust and fascination. I bared reddened teeth at him, watching his muscles clench to suppress a flinch.

"Shall we proceed, Your Grace?" I asked.

He inclined his head by a fraction. Good. I'd weathered the first blow, but if I knew anything about patterns that was the first of three. I would have to remain wary. Aisha had thought it odd that the Procerans had not fought back harder on the terms of truce and retreat being the first subject addressed, but now we knew why. They'd intended on flipping the table before it even came to that. Now, though, they were stuck actually discussing it. Withdrawal from the Tenth Crusade for the royals had never been in the cards, much as it irked me. For them to put their seal to a treaty binding them to that would be high treason and sustained heresy under Proceran law. One of the ancient First Princes had passed that motion through the Highest Assembly, after a few Arlesite principalities dropped out of one of the crusades against the Kingdom of the Dead. Their agitations in the south while the rest of the Principate was busy dying up north had been so deeply despised by the surviving princes they'd been willing to limit their own prerogatives to see the deserters punished. No, our wiggle room was narrower than that. The first opening was that, technically speaking, the Tenth Crusade had been declared on Praes. It would be damaging to their reputation to make a deal with me, but not actually illegal.

The second was that I wasn't asking for peace, only a truce. The terms we were after were eighteen months where none of the signatories or soldiers under their command could enter Callow, which was where we first got shafted by the premises agreed on. They managed to have it defined as 'the lands under the rule of the Queen in Callow', which gave them some flexibility. The moment a part of the kingdom renounced my rule, it was fair game again and they could get involved without breaking the letter of the agreement. Or, and I was just guessing here, if a disavowed heroine like the Saint just happened cut my head off – well, it would be convenient coincidence that there were no longer any lands under the rule of the Queen in Callow, wouldn't it? I was going to have to watch my back very, very carefully in the coming months. Eve

more so than usual. Aisha began bargaining forthree years of truce and slowly allowed herself to be whittled down to fourteen months, though at least she got a concession out of it. The fantassins across the field were in the employment of the princes and princesses attending, but that was a matter of contract. Those could be released, at which point the terms would no longer apply to them. Horse-trading for six months less of truce, Aisha managed to extract they'd sign the treaty as well. None of the companies would be able to just sign up with the Iron Prince's host instead.

A goodwill clause forbidding the fantassins to simply disband their companies and reform under a different name was written in, because even *I* had seen that loophole coming. It was when we moved to the second subject, supplies, that Thief's predictions came true and they began their attempt to fuck us in earnest. You'd think they'd at least provide dinner first. Bad form, Amadis. Going at it with only wine made it look like they thought we were easy.

"As a sign of good faith, we would require that the Army of Callow continue to provide supplies while negotiations are ongoing, at the previously agreed cost," Prince Amadis requested, meeting my eyes directly.

It wasn't the first time they'd tried that. Fairly early on they'd narrowed in on the fact that my diplomatic training was lacking compared to Aisha's or Talbot's, and since they'd tried to get me involved as much as possible. Best way for them to do that was to ditch the mouthpiece and let the Prince of Iserre do the talking: he had enough status that etiquette dictated I couldn't just foist the thing off to Aisha if he spoke to me directly. It was a play on their part, we both knew that. But it also left me with no real reason to call them out, and if these talks imploded because I'd walked out without a damned good reason? That was the story of a villain queen so arrogant she was willing to starve dozens of thousands for perceived insults. It did not bode well for me. This was going to be a pivot, I knew that and the Pilgrim most definitely did. It meant every word spoken today had *weight*. I'd be eroding at my own gains if I pulled out now, and even if it likely wouldn't be enough to flip the entire story the opposition didn't *need* that, strictly speaking. Just my position being weakened would make it much easier to kill me. Was this the second blow? No, the confrontation was too indirect. The Pilgrim had made himself the speaker for Above, it wasn't something that could be handed to Amadis like a plate of pastries.

"While we are not willing to make that concession, we share your worry on the appearance of coercion," I blandly replied.

Meaning it wouldn't look good if it appeared we were negotiating with a loaded crossbow pointed at their balls, though we were both aware there were plenty crossbows today to go around. The Jacks had confirmed Hasenbach had her own scrying-capable mages in play, called the Order of the Red Lion. We also knew, from Masego, that they were at least a decade behind Praesi spell formulas when it came to that, which meant they couldn't do relays and their range was limited: they could chain the reports manually, but that was tricky

business. Hierophant's best guess for the crusaders getting news from the battle at the Red Flower Vales was a delay of two days. Knowing Black, he was very unlikely to gamble it all on the first day. He'd stretch it out through series of fortifications, made even more efficient by the narrow valleys and steep slopes of the Vales. That provided us with some room to manoeuver.

"We are willing to immediately provide three days' worth of supplies, at the agreed on cost, to prevent that misunderstanding," I continued calmly.

Prince Amadis' heartbeat quickened. Anger. *Yeah, you princely shit. We saw that one coming.* There was still risk involved, should Papenheim somehow win an immediate and crushing victory – or, more probably, if Black decided a strategic retreat out of the Vales was the correct decision – but odds were the crusaders would have to make the deal without knowing the outcome. They *really* wanted to avoid that, of course. But outright feeding them for three days yanked away their pretext to push for better terms. They could still delay until the days were past, but then we'd be the ones with grounds to protest bad faith. *And we both know Kegan is coming. Your window of opportunity is narrow.* If they failed to make terms before the Deoraithe arrived, their bargaining position took a hit. Juniper had urged me to send Larat to fetch Kegan's host, and I'd already made up my mind to agree if we didn't walk out with a deal by the day's end. It was a naked threat, sure, and before the meeting began I'd worried about souring the process by resorting to it. But they were aready pushing back pretty hard, and if they were stretching things out on purpose threats were not a line I was unwilling to cross.

"The gesture is appreciated," Amadis said evenly. "However, I worry this could be misconstrued as impropriety. Rumours of bribery would damage the reputation of all involved."

My eyes narrowed. We were making the crusaders pay for the supplies, it was hardly a fucking bribe. Princes were touchy about their reputation, though, so while it wasn't a good reason it was a halfway plausible one. *And it wasn't a reply we anticipated, though we should have.* I glanced at Aisha, but she could be no help. Fuck. There was probably a way out of this, but I couldn't think of one at the moment.

"We can table the matter for the moment," I conceded grudgingly.

"As you say," the Prince of Iserre replied, the hint of a smile on his lips as he inclined his head.

Aisha bowed in her seat, then addressed the table.

"We now address the third subject on the program," the Supply Tribune said, "as requested by the Callowan delegation. Provenance and direction of promised coin."

In other words, who was going to foot the bill for the supplies they were getting. That was going to be one of the trickier bits, Vivienne had told me. The Procerans were going to try to pass it all to Hasenbach, but we might have a way around that. For 'practical reasons' we were going to suggest they provide the coin themselves, though it would be framed as a loan on the part of the First

Prince towards them. Our turn to screw them over the negotiation premises, for this one. As an expeditionary force of the First Prince, they had legal grounds to agree to that – if they were Hasenbach's mandated minions, anything falling under war reparations was ultimately her responsibility to pay for. Aisha had noted some of them might consider it a worthwhile trade off to have the First Prince owe them money, since by leveraging that debt they might avoid political retaliation for a retreat. Thief had been more dubious, arguing that they'd balk since Cordelia might manage to get out of paying them anything back. It was going to come down to finesse.

"The delegation recognizes the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim, formal advisor to the Prince of Iserre," the mouthpiece intoned.

Well, shit. We were halfway through the list now, so in retrospective I should have seen it coming.

"In matter of direction, I seek clarification," the Pilgrim said. "The Principate of Procer is currently at war with the Dread Empire of Praes. As it could be considered treason for any coin paid through this treaty to come to gild Imperial coffers through either commerce or tribute, a question must first be addressed. Does the Queen in Callow intend to pursue formal independence from the Tower?"

I closed my eyes and thought. Why would he care about the gold? Coin didn't mean shit to heroes. No, he had a reason to ask this that shaped a story. *Independence from the Tower*. Callow already was independent, effectively speaking, but there'd been no open break. Malicia and I knew it was just a matter of time, but the current fiction it wasn't was useful for us both. If it was discarded, what was the result? Most likely, Malicia had to declare I was in rebellion even if she did nothing immediate about it. That was the part that had me wary, though. She couldn't do anything about it right now, not with Ashur marauding the coasts and a city freshly sacked. So why would the old man be after that? *Pilgrim might not know about Nok, though*, I mused. No, wrong way to think about this. If this was a political play it'd be the Procerans doing the talking. Since it was the Pilgrim, he was leaning on the pivot for some reason. Malicia declared me a rebel. What did that mean, in the greater scheme of things? Ah, shit. *Evil turns on Evil*. That was his play. And it was a story old as the First Dawn, too, so if I caught even the hem of it in my fingers it was going to drag me through seventy fucking Hells. Stories repeated so often they were considered self-evident truths had a way of pushing themselves to the fore no matter what the people involved wanted.

All right, then. What could I do to avoid the pitfall?

Couldn't argue there was no need to have the talk, this time, since that could be taken as me trying to frame the Procerans for treason. It'd turn this from truce talks to 'Evil queen lays a cunning trap', and that fucked everything up. I couldn't lie in front of the Pilgrim, he'd see through it and that got me back in the deep even if 'the Heavens told me it was untrue' might not hold up too well as a negotiating position. Flatly admitting I was going to just led me to a

different problem, so that was straight out. Could I maybe keep this contained, force an oath whatever was spoken on the subject wouldn't get out of this pavilion? *No*, I decided. I didn't have enough of a leg to stand on, and it wasn't like the Procerans would jump for joy at the prospect of being oath-bound to someone holding a fae mantle. *If you can't dodge, attack*, I thought. Instead of avoiding *his* story, what story could *I* make? Liberating rebel wouldn't hold, not while I was wearing a crown. I'd only ever managed to squeak into heroic Roles when the opposition was... less than flexible, anyway. Treacherous lieutenant to Malicia? I could fit the boots, but it wouldn't get me anywhere I wanted to be. Praesi stories would just make it worse, as a rule, so it had to be either Callowan or old and worn enough it was up for grabs by anyone.

Unless... *Akua*. She'd been on her own idea of good behaviour since Second Liesse, which had taken a while for me to puzzle out. She should have been scheming to get out, and to be frank she probably was, but she was also very much trying to be useful. To get out of the box more often, in part, but there were deeper reasons. I had beaten her, or at least she believed as much. According to the sack full of razor blades that was Praesi philosophy, that meant she was my follower now. That was an old story, and though the Wasteland had practically turned it into a religion it wasn't *just* a Wasteland favourite. Or Evil's in general. Early crew of heroes runs into a seeming enemy they fight out of misunderstanding, then fall together either facing a common foe or when the misunderstanding is finally cleared. Everyone's friends, some cackling villain gets stabbed in unison and the Heavens pat everyone's ass approvingly. Hells, that was more or less how Archer had ended up joining the Woe now that I thought about it. So I needed to be metaphorical Archer, fighting the crusaders out of a silly misunderstanding somehow involving three bloody days of battle and at least thirty thousand dead.

I am a crusader, I thought. What did I want? To fuck over the Wasteland, a sentiment I wasn't exactly unsympathetic to. *Kill Catherine Foundling, since she's an abomination and also an asshole who keeps killing our guys.* How did I cease being the asshole who kept killing their guys? Well, maybe if they stopped trying to kill m- no, not productive. Plenty of heroes were guy-killing assholes, I reminded myself, in and of itself it wasn't a deal breaker. Larger perspective. Looking down from Above, what was happening in Callow? *Praes is still in charge*, I thought. The borders, the separate laws and the coinage wouldn't matter to something like the Hashmallim. A villain was still on the throne, the former apprentice of the Black Knight. My army was more than half Callowan, these days, but I still had a detachment of mass-murdering Praesi household troops and the greenskins. Goblins had an unfortunate propensity for stabbing, and orcs *did* eat people. Wasn't even that large a part of their diet, and it wasn't like they ate people alive – it was illegal, if nothing else – but even occasional corpse-eating did tend to disqualify people from standing on the shiny side of the fence. As far as Above was concerned, I was a Dread Empress wearing the Queen of Blades' clothes.

But I *was* in charge in their eyes, wasn't I? The legalities we'd been quibbling about all day didn't mean dust in the eyes of the Gods. That was the whole reason to remove me, wasn't it? A villainous ruler for Callow was bad for business, regardless of the earthly practicalities involved. Which meant that if I made a choice, Above took that as a choice for all of Callow. There was an opening there. If I pulled the rug out from under the heroes, it worked for the entire kingdom. My eyes narrowed. I didn't have to stop being a – unfairly characterized, I believed – murderous asshole. I just had to be *their* murderous asshole. Metaphorically speaking. Probably. And the way to achieve that... what was the name of Cordelia's Friendly League of Upstanding Nations again? Ah, right. I cleared my throat, meeting the Grey Pilgrim's eyes with a grin that was all teeth.

"To answer your question," I said, "I intend to seek signatory status with the Grand Alliance within the year."

Pandemonium erupted, the Pilgrim's face went blank and my grin only got wider.

Chapter 22

Trip

> "A war fought and won for the wrong reasons, under the wrong cause, can be a greater threat to the Praes than simple defeat. Maleficent the First spoke of villains raising their own gallows, but failed to add that the killing stroke in a hanging comes from the height of the drop."
>
> Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

"Preposterous," Prince Arnaud of Cantal blustered.

He wasn't the only one to speak up in the aftermath of that particular trebuchet stone being lobbed, but he was by far the loudest. And his heartbeat had not changed in the slightest, though his face was the very picture of angry befuddlement. All right, that one bore watching. I'd never met anyone this good at acting outside of the High Lords and *maybe* a handful of Named. I leaned back into my seat and riffled through my cloak pockets until I had my pipe in hand. The small satchel of wakeleaf parted under my fingers and I poured the contents into the chamber. I had a few matches, but also a quicker way. I coughed until Masego turned his attention from the book he was not-so-discretely reading under the table to me. I tapped the side of the pipe he'd gifted me with a finger. Scoffing, he flicked his wrist and fire bloomed within the chamber.

"Thank you, Lord Hierophant," I drawled. "As for the many statements of the Proceran delegation, I'll point you to the Chosen known as the Grey Pilgrim. A truth-teller of great skill, as I understand it."

The gaze of everyone in the pavilion moved to the old man, still standing and devoid of expression. *That's right,* I thought. *I'm not lying.* I didn't have to. I very much doubted the Grand Alliance would just hand me a tankard and invite me to sit at the table, but even a refusal would need more than just Hasenbach involved. The Ashurans would have to put the question through committees, unless their quasi-king Magon Hadast intervened, and more im-

portantly the Dominion would have to go through the Majilis. Their inept, bickering and deeply divided equivalent to the Highest Assembly. The entire process could take months even for a refusal. And if they accepted? Well, it wasn't like I wasn't intending to make deals with all of them eventually. It was a necessary component to the Liesse Accords being adopted. It was a different approach than I'd intended, but so long as it worked what did I care?

"The Queen in Callow did not speak a lie," the Pilgrim flatly said.

I'd been a bit too much to swallow to tell them outright I was telling the truth, apparently. Nice to know even the Peregrine could be petty.

"This is a trick," Princess Adeline of Orne insisted. "You are one of the Damned."

Fancy Proceran talk for villain, I took it. *The Chosen and the Damned, huh.* Somehow I suspected a lot of foreign heroes who ended up fighting against Procer also ended up, by pure coincidence of course, painted with damnation brush. I breathed in the smoke, then allowed it to billow upwards with my exhale.

"And?" I said. "I already offered the Pilgrim passage through Arcadia if your army was willing to assault Praes directly. I'm not exactly unwilling to kick in the Empire's teeth, Princess, and I was under the impression that was exactly what the Tenth Crusade was about. Or are there other concerns I don't know about?"

My smile turned a little colder at that. She did not flinch, but her heartbeat quickened in fear. The taste of it was just as intoxicating as the wine I was oathbound not to drink. Brave soul, that one, but out of her depth today. She wasn't in on the game the Pilgrim was playing. Prince Amadis began to speak, but the Pilgrim hastily cleared his throat to stay the man's tongue. *Wouldn't do to have the mortals fuck up your scheme, would it?*

"As a vassal state of the Tower-" the old man began.

"Is the Proceran delegation turning back on the premises of this negotiation?" Aisha interrupted smilingly. "You are addressing the Queen in Callow, Grey Pilgrim, by mutual agreement."

I beamed at the lovely tribune. Ah, Aisha. Always quick on the uptake, wasn't she? If it didn't have 'terrible idea' written all over it in red ink, it would be tempting to give her a whirl.

"Over twenty thousand men were butchered by the Army of Callow," Malanza spoke up. "You expect us to *ignore* this?"

"All a misunderstanding, evidently," I replied calmly. "I believed your expeditionary force to be an attempt at invasion. I regret what came from it, but you must understand that Callowans have a chequered history with armies crossing our borders after using massive sorcerous rituals."

There was a muted sound as Brandon Talbot choked on his tongue. The implied comparison to the Dread Empire ruffled more than a few feathers on the other side of the table, but they couldn't exactly deny the bird's eye view of

it. Hasenbach's burning of a passage was admittedly more grounded than your average Dread Emperor's crowning disaster, but the similarities were there.

"Your alleged intent to seek alignment with the Grand Alliance is irrelevant to the negotiations being held today," the Pilgrim said.

I glanced at Aisha. I was pulling one on him so far but it wouldn't do to get cocky. The more we conversed the higher the chances he turned the tables.

"That is inaccurate," the Taghreb aristocrat replied. "As is would be unlawful to be a signatory of the Alliance while paying any form of tribute to the Tower, providing this statement served the purpose of answering your question."

So, I mused, watching Amadis across the table even though he was not the object of my thoughts. *You going to keep fighting this one, Pilgrim, or give ground and rally for the third?* I'd cut the grass under his feet by presenting myself as a possible ally, right in the wake of a bloody battle that saw no clear winner. He couldn't work the 'heroes with their back up against the wall' story angle with a foundation that weak, not while the Procerans were fed and under truce. 'Evil turns on Evil' had been his move, but I should have tiptoed around the pitfall by stating in front of a truth-teller that I was willing to slap some red crosses onto the armour of the Army of Callow and fight the Good fight. That'd make me the one prick in every heroic band that crossed lines for the Greater Good, if it worked. The Lone Swordsman of continental coalitions, if you would. *Two for two, so far. Parry and riposte. But we both know it's the third one that matters, don't we*? I puff at my pipe, allowing the wakeleaf to fill my lungs. The old man was studying me in silence, but I did not meet his eyes.

"The clarification was sufficient," Pilgrim finally said, and sat down.

Cutting his losses, I presumed, since I was no longer willing to engage. I remained silent as negotiations picked up again through intermediaries. The Procerans made an argument that reparations were not needed if this was all an accident, but Aisha turned it around by noting that the sale of supplies was a different matter entirely. That the terms of the truce specifically did not prevent them from entering Praes took the wind out of their sails, since they had to maintain the pretence that their 'expeditionary force' wasn't an army meant to invade Callow – if they strayed from that, they were entering a nightmarish quagmire of war reparations and official apologies none of them could really afford back in Procer. My attention began to wane as the hours passed, tediously taking us to Afternoon Bell, but I forced myself to follow everything closely. I could not afford to be taken unawares when the Pilgrim intervened again. Yet none of the heroes spoke so much as a word, and I grew tenser the longer the sword remained hanging over my head. My side got its way when it came to terms of payment for the supplies, though the Procerans bargained down to only needing to pay a quarter of the total sum directly out of their pockets even if it was framed as a loan from Hasenbach to them. Odds were the First Prince would flip them the finger and that quarter was all I'd ever see, but considering I was essentially selling them back their own supplies I'd take it anyway. Even

just having the documents would give me something to use when I had to treat with Hasenbach herself down the line.

The diplomatic claptrap continued, polite verbal fencing back and forth across the table. The crusaders tried to fuck us over what land was actually recognized as 'under the rule of the Queen in Callow', and to my distaste got the better of it. I couldn't exactly make the argument that the Red Flower Vales were mine when they were factually in the hands of the Legions of Terror, and that meant the northern crusade could move against Black down there without breaking our terms. It'd be months before they even got out of Callow, I told myself. And it would take even more time for them to recover and march on the Vales. By then Black would either have won or lost against Papenheim. If he'd won, I'd have to trust that he could hold the valleys regardless. I couldn't afford for him not to. And if he lost, well, the northern crusade would still be forbidden to go further than the Vales until the truce ran out. At that point I'd have more immediate problems anyway. We weren't halfway to Evening Bell and there was only a single issue that hadn't been addressed, guarantees for the treaty – though we'd have to double back to the supplies since that one had been kicked down the slope by Prince Amadis. It was beginning to look like we'd walk out of the pavilion with an actual agreement before nightfall, which had me wary.

The Procerans could have delayed much more than they had. We'd *expected* them to, as long as the battle for the Vales was undecided. This was going well, which meant I was about to have my knuckles rapped. Except the Pilgrim didn't get up. It was the mouthpiece that addressed the subject, and my fingers clenched under the table. This wasn't going to be straightforward negotiations, since it was about the mechanisms that would be enforcing the treaty. I wanted oaths to the Heavens out of everyone involved, witnessed by a hero, but Aisha had pretty bluntly informed me that wasn't going to happen even if I offered to make an oath of my own. Our best guess was that they'd push for something along the lines of the agreement being made public so anyone breaking it would have their reputation tarnished. We wouldn't accept that, since they might very well get away with breaking a treaty with a villain with praise for being clever in screwing over the enemy instead of any backlash for dealing in bad faith. The compromise we'd be working for was material value being left behind as guarantee, as well as staggered departure for the Proceran host so we'd have a knife at their throat if they tried to double-cross us. Breaking a promise to the bearer of a fae mantle would come back to haunt them, anyway, so this was mostly a precaution to account for any outside solution we didn't know about.

Except after Aisha proposed my terms – as a starting position to be bargained down from, to my chagrin – the Procerans didn't offer what we'd expected.

"As a sign of good faith, we are willing to offer a royal hostage," the middle-aged diplomat said. "We would, however, require an accompanying observer and a guarantee of safety for both."

That had to be the Pilgrim's play, but I wasn't seeing it. There wasn't a good angle to use with the supplies deal, at least none that I could see, and after that there was nothing *left* to negotiate about. All right, then, royal hostage. What could he do with that? Assassinate the hostage after I took custody of them, so this entire treaty was ripped in half. If Malicia had made me an offer like this, it would be what I expected. Except that this wasn't the way Pilgrim did things. Sure, he'd basically put his seal on the Saint offing me under a – glamoured, I had to concede that much – truce banner, but that plan didn't fit with the way he'd approached this so far. Letting me die for the greater good was one thing, and he'd been pretty upfront that was essentially his intent when we first sat down for our fireside chat. But murder? No, that was going against the grain. He could be banking on either one of my people fucking up or Praes being out for blood, though. Not outright bloodying his hand, but shaping the situation so it would unfold the way he needed it to. *That* I could buy.

Except I'd have the hostage neck deep in wards in the safest place I could find, and Malicia wanted to use Amadis' gaggle of expansionists to make a mess in Procer. That wasn't to say if she decided it would be useful to weaken me she wouldn't assassinate royalty that wasn't Malanza or Milenan, the two she'd ordered me not to kill. But unless she had Assassin to call on, which I was almost certain she didn't, she'd have a very hard time pulling this off. I had the fucking Hierophant designing my defences, these days, and the Guild of Assassins in my pocket. It wasn't impossible but it would require a significant investment of resources at a juncture when her backyard was already on fire. *Pilgrim might not know a High Lord's seat got sacked and the court is up in arms about it, though,* I mused. Lack of information? No, I could never assume that. Not with the Augur on the other side, and the pile of aspects the heroes had to draw from. Hells, it wasn't even off the table that one of them had a godsdamned angel whispering secrets in their ear. In what circumstances was giving me a royal hostage the correct move, assuming they didn't get killed?

If he wanted this treaty to work.

Was it that simple? That'd been treating him like an unmovable enemy when he was actually willing to work with me? No. *Be cold. Be clear. Be a creature of logic, because the moment you allow your judgement to be affected is the moment you lose.* My understanding of the Pilgrim, as based in fact, was that he was no more inclined to compromise than I. I desperately wanted someone on the other side to be willing to work with me, so I was painting what I wanted to see on the canvas. If he'd allowed this, it was because he saw a path to victory through it. And I couldn't discern what he wanted to accomplish from my point of view, so I would have to adopt his. *I am the Pilgrim*, I thought. *I have seen dozens if not hundreds of the villains, and I am apt at reading them. My truth-telling abilities may run deeper than that.* How did I trick Catherine Foundling, if I understood what she was after? She wanted the treaty to succeed, so – no, mistake. That was the shatranj board on the ground, not the one he was trying to win on. The villain queen has wiggled out of my plan to pit her

against other villains by trying to make herself into the suspect ally on the side of the Tenth Crusade. That is an issue, since it makes her difficult to assault. But she took a stance, and every stance has vulnerabilities. What is hers? She is behaving like an ally, looking down from Above.

How much effort would it actually take, to *enforce* that?

My grip loosened under the table. So that was it. I'd already done it to myself accidentally with the Lone Swordsman, back in the day: the Pilgrim's play was a redemption story. It didn't matter that I was in charge of Callow, if I was no longer a villain. Sure, most redemption stories ended in death. Sacrifice to make up for previous sins and all that, passing the torch to someone that had the same heroism but less blood on their hands. That was just spice in the wine, though, since it got him all the benefits of Callow not longer heading down the cliff without having to deal the issues inherent in keeping me around after my bloody history. In a way, this could be considered an elegantly subtle assassination attempt. The Grey Pilgrim or someone he handpicked according to his understanding of me would be the observer in the Proceran terms, and then all he had to do was wait and let the story do the heavy lifting. I laughed softly, ignoring the odd looks it got me. Gods, I'd underestimated him. He was playing me on the earthly board to win on the story one. Callow, of which I was queen, needed the truce for practical reasons. I needed the truce because it was a first step in getting the Accords signed. And so I would accept, knowing he was trying to kill me through it.

I admired the calculated methods Black used to kill heroes. I'd learned from them, emulated the techniques when dealing with the heroes who came into Callow. In that same distant way, I could admire what the Pilgrim had done here. My teacher was a villain, so he came at it from the perspective that the stories would get him killed. So he avoided them. The Grey Pilgrim was a hero, so he came at it from the perspective that the stories would get him what he wanted. So he leant into them. From an objective perspective, even if this was very likely meant to kill me, I could only commend how well I was being played. He'd read what I wanted, and was giving it to me in a way that led to his victory. And even deeper than that, he must know that even if I saw through this I'd feel bound to accept. Because I wasn't Black. I was not a pupil of martyrdom, but I did believe there were things worth dying for. If I paid my dues in blood to the Gods Above, Callow would avoid the slaughter marching towards it. All it required me to do was smile, accept, and kiss the knife that would slit my throat. *You have found the thing I most want in the world, and used it to kill me*.

There wasn't a fucking devil in existence that could have played it better.

"And the identity of the hostage and observer?" I asked, breaking in before Aisha could pursue the matter.

"As the leader of this host, it is my duty to serve as the hostage," Prince Amadis Milenan said, inclining his head towards me.

And it was no doubt a fortunate coincidence that this honourable sacrifice

would make him the hero who'd gone into the wolf's den for the sake of his men instead of the ambitious fuckup who'd pissed away over twenty thousand men trying annex Callow. The other royals would return to Procer, where Hasenbach wouldn't be able to blame them – Prince Amadis, after all, was the official leader of the army. And the man himself would be out of the First Prince's reach to punish, not that she'd be *able* to after he'd become a hostage to save his men. He'd come out of this smelling like roses, a tragic figure who had fallen prey to the wickedness of the Black Queen. Meanwhile his allies in Procer would be building the altar of his legend so when he returned it would be to the praise of the thousands instead of blackened by inglorious defeat. Burning Hells. Even when I won, with these people, they *still* didn't lose. Both sides getting their way had felt like a better principle before I'd had to look the truth of it in the eye.

"And I volunteer myself as the observer," the Grey Pilgrim added calmly.

I didn't humour him with a reply. We already knew my answer. I leaned towards Aisha.

"I'm going to agree to this," I whispered in her ear. "Use it to extract concessions over supplies. You'll find them more flexible than anticipated."

Her dark eyes were troubled, but she was a Wastelander through and through. Her face became a mask and she did not argue with me in front of the enemy. I leaned back and my eyes turned to the Pilgrim. I was past pretending this wasn't his game.

"I'll accept these terms," I said. "I believe we're done here?"

The old man inclined his head.

"So we are," he replied.

I rose to my feet, flicking a glance at Prince Amadis.

"Aisha Bishara speaks with my full authority," I said. "She will finish these negotiations in my name."

It was not proper etiquette, but I did not have it in me to stay seated and smile across the table from a man who'd just arranged my death, however beautifully. I offered the bare necessities of courtesy before leaving, Thief trailing behind me with worried eyes. Hierophant only noticed what was happening when I was halfway out the pavilion, then got up and left without even the semblance of an explanation. I halted and looked up at the descending sun, after I exited the conference. The Pilgrim thought he'd won. But he didn't understand quite what I was after, did he? That for the Accords to work, there was a need for someone enforcing them from the side of Evil. Or maybe he did, and didn't believe it would make a difference. In the end, a mistake had been made today.

Whether it was his or mine, only time would tell.

Interlude: Red The Flowers

"Red the flowers, red the crown
Red this day of bleak renown
How soon they forgot Eleanor
Along every oath they swore
Red the flowers, red the wreath
Red the sword that left the sheath
Now a king lies dead on the grass
Taught the vows of princes pass
Red the flowers, red the grave
Red the biers of knights so brave
They who thrice rode and died
Under banners of olden pride
Red the flowers, red the right
Red the fires this day will light
For every slight there is a price
Ours will be long and paid twice."

'Red The Flowers', a Callowan rebel song written in the wake of the Proceran occupation of Callow

It had been some time since Amadeus had last inhaled the scent of carnage. The dawn of the third day brought with it strong winds and burning sun: the corpses were rotting in the heat, the smell of them carried to the third line of fortifications in the southern valley. The Iron Prince had ordered a halt to the offensive with nightfall, the crusaders setting camp among the ruined walls and bastion they'd spent the day taking at such great cost. Papenheim was not fresh to the art of war: he knew better than to engage a Praesi army under cover of dark. Especially one that'd had most a year to raise siege engines goblins would field and aim perfectly when the crusaders stumbled along blindly with torches and holy flames. Grem stood by his side atop the tower known as the southern half of the Bloody Twins, the unusually slender orc towering two feet above him. Marshal Grem One-Eye spat over the wall, staring at the enemy stirring in the distance.

"They're not wasting time," the orc said. "Papenheim wants to bludgeon through as quick as possible, looks like. You were right about that much."

Amadeus remained silent, for the moment. Grem had been of the opinion that there'd be probing attacks to weather but no serious offensive until the armies of Levant arrived to reinforce the Iron Prince's sixty thousand Procerans. The initial span of the war had leant credence to the orc's prediction, but after the crusaders up north passed through the Stairway the old Lycaonese had begun his march in earnest. There were political considerations at work, the Black Knight suspected. Cordelia Hasenbach had called this crusade and assembled the alliance, but mistrust still reigned between Procer and its temporary allies. Even just the impression that she intended to bleed Levant instead of her own armies would raise the spectre of suspicion within the Grand Alliance. The old fear of Proceran expansionism haunted her regime still. Amadeus could sympathize. Past Dread Emperors had burned all the Empire's diplomatic bridges so thoroughly most ruins were still actively smouldering. It had taken Alaya more than two decades to craft a rapprochement with Ashur, and it'd still all gone up in flames after only a few months of diplomatic correspondence between Hasenbach and Magon Hadast.

"I'm not so certain he's fully committed," Amadeus finally replied. "The First Prince needs blood on the floor to show her allies, but Papenheim has not been careless in his advance. He's willing to trade but not outright sacrifice."

"Thinning our numbers *is* the best way for them to win this," Grem conceded. "They've certainly got the levies to throw away."

The legions garrisoning the Red Flower Vales numbered six. Twenty-four thousand men in full. The First under Grem was holding the southern passage along with Mok's Third and Sacker's Ninth. Marshal Ranker and her Fourth were leading the defence of the northern valleys, commanding the freshly-rebuilt Twelfth and Nekheb's Tenth. That last legion they'd had to employ sparingly. General Catastrophe, as they were fondly called by their living soldiers, fielded a legion of undead captained by necromancers. But even alone the dragon was a force to reckon with. Combined with foot soldiers they could torch along the enemy at no great loss? Nekheb could turn around a battle, if well deployed. They were also, unfortunately, *very* vulnerable to heroes. Dragonslaying was an old heroic staple, and there was at least one hero on the opposite side with an archery-related Name. Wanton use would only result in the death of one of their primary assets.

"We've been light on losses so far," Amadeus noted. "And we still hold three of the five defensive lines in both passes. It cost them at least seven thousand to get this far in."

"Less," Grem replied. "If our effectiveness estimates on their priests is solid, anyway. We'll need to start deploying our contingencies today to blunt their momentum."

Amadeus looked at the glittering wall of steel forming in the distance, brow creasing.

"You hold command," he said. "I am here in an advisory role."

The orc barked out a laugh.

"Meddling's in your blood, Amadeus," he said. "You can't help it."

"And yet my role remains advisory," the Black Knight mildly replied. "I would caution you that sending Warlock onto the field before the enemy revealed their own Named casters will have consequences, but the the choice is ultimately yours."

Marshal Grem One-Eye half-squinted at the enemy, then cracked his neck. When they'd been young, the orc had done it purely for the satisfaction. Now his bones creaked and bent with age, the one enemy neither of them could defeat on the field.

"We've got a few tricks to deploy before ol' Red Skies gets off his arse," Grem decided. "Let's see how they like the taste of those."

Amadeus inhaled the scent of it again. Blood and rotting flesh, shit and steel and a hundred other small things drowned out by them. It was still thin, for now.

It would grow stronger before the day was done.

—

Klaus had been raised to the old military dictum of never assaulting a fortress unless you had three times the enemy's number. Back in the Empire the first Terribilis had noted in his *Ars Tactica* that twice the number was sufficient if you had spellcaster superiority, but that was a worthless piece of advice for anyone but the Praesi. You couldn't go up against the Dread Empire and expect your spellslingers to be up to snuff. Much, as he had discovered over the last two days, like you couldn't expect dwarven siege weapons to be a match for goblin engineering. The first day had been opened by an artillery duel and his host had not come out the better for it. The Empire's trebuchets and ballistas fired further and swifter than the catapults and trebuchets bought from the Kingdom Under, and the knock-off scorpions brought by the Arlesites had been about useful as tits on a sparrow. Not a single one of the them had survived long enough to come into firing range. If the old general had twice as many men he could have swept through one line of defence after another, taking the losses as he went. But as things stood? If he went it half-cocked, less than a third of his army would emerge from the meat grinder to set foot in Callow.

The outer walls in both valleys were old Proceran fortifications taken by the Kingdom of Callow the last time the border principalities botched an invasion of the Vales, later repurposed to serve as defensive lines facing the other way. They were, essentially, piles of stone twenty feet high with steeply sloped hills behind them the Praesi had set their engines on. No bastions, no towers, nothing more elaborate than stones piled up high with mortar holding them together. One-Eye and the Carrion Lord had defended it with a bare few hundred, regulars and sappers, so he'd launched an escalade under cover of the artillery duel. Within the first half-hour of the offensive he'd lost over two thousand soldiers. Sappers lobbed their munitions onto the ladders, killing as many with the fall as the explosions, while crossbow volleys fired straight into tightly-packed ranks earned swaths of dead. They'd taken the damned walls, of

course. Fortifications that bare couldn't be held against his numbers, and he'd half-expected the enemy would let him have them uncontested. Instead the Praesi had defended for less than an hour, taken maybe three dozen casualties and retreated with all their engines intact. That'd set the tone for the second day.

Another four thousand gone to take the kind of defences you saw in your average Lycaonese border town. Low walls and towers, a single central bastion. He'd sent the heroes in with the first wave, with massed mage support, and run into a godsdamned wall. The fortifications were warded so thoroughly nothing he had could crack them in the slightest, and the grounds fifty feet from the foot of the walls were seeded what Praesi called lily fields. Hidden pits with spikes at the bottom. The assault's momentum shattered, Legion mages began torching everything in sight and the entire attack would have collapsed if not for a Chosen called the Fortunate Fool. Klaus had considered the man essentially useless, considering he had truck with more herbs than your average alchemist, but the hero had stumbled his way onto a safe path through the lily field by sheer happenstance. The other Chosen rallied the levies and led an assault on the walls in the southern valley. None of the Damned had come out to meet them, at least, something he'd been assured was a consequence of the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods refraining from entering the fray.

It'd taken most of the day to force the Praesi back in both valleys. He'd called a halt after that, well aware his men did not have the stomach to march into whatever nastiness the Carrion Lord had awaiting. Or the ability to match goblin nightsight: all torches and priestly glows would accomplish was mark targets for the enemy siege. Now the third dawn had come, and steel would be bared again. The defensive line ahead would be the beginning of the real fight, he knew. On both sides, though at different lengths from a bird's eye view, the valleys narrowed into passes flanked by cliffs. Those natural defences had been the seat of Callowan fortresses for centuries, the rock Proceran offensives broke on. The Bloody Twins, Alamans called them. Massive towers forty feet high sitting atop slopes at an angle of almost sixty degrees. There were dirt paths leading up, but they were not wide. Forcing the Twins was going to be ugly business, but it had to be done. They were the high point of both valleys, the terrain going down towards Callow after them. Claiming the high ground would allow Klaus' fucking engines to finally start being more than expensive targets, and with the fortresses still awaiting ahead he'd need every advantage he could get.

Klaus swatted Ratbiter absent-mindedly to keep him from chewing away at the red marigolds that grew everywhere in the valleys, and were allegedly responsible for their name. They were said to have been gold, once upon a time, but had since grown red from all the blood spilled on these grounds over the centuries.

"De Guison," he called out, and the mageling snapped to attention. "Contact the northern front. We're beginning our attacks."

The man made a three-act play out of obeying a simple order, but the old general's attention had already left him. He gestured for his personal horn-blower to sound the offensive and eyed the grounds he needed to take before getting to the southern Twin. Almost four hundred yards of more or less flat grounds, before getting at the foot of the slope. Then another half hundred, marching up one of the continent's most viciously designed natural fortresses. He was going to lose thousands just on the approach, and that'd be if the Praesi had no surprised awaiting. He knew better than to expect that. There was a reason he'd ordered for the Fortunate Fool to run ahead of the first ranks, the silly-looking idiot in silks taking point so good soldiers need not die. His instincts had been correct, he discovered shortly.

The Chosen walked over innocuous-looking grounds and was blown high into the sky by an explosion about a hundred yards from the bottom of the slope, landing on his back a dozen feet forward. Where he blew up again. Under Klaus' sceptical gaze, five explosions were chained in a row until the man arrived halfway through the evidently mined field. He got up, looking a little charred, and patted himself in panic to put out the flames on his chest. The Prince of Hannoven was familiar with the effects of Praesi demolition charges, and he silently reassessed how bloody difficult this Chosen would be to actually put down. A few streaks of lightning shot down from atop the Twin but the Fortunate Fool ducked them by a series of very coincidental trips and falls, before waddling back to the Proceran lines and loudly claiming victory. Klaus now had a basic notion of enemy mage range and the concentration of buried charges. The assault proper could begin.

"Priests forward," he ordered his standard-bearer. "Sweep for the munitions."

The robed brothers and sisters of the House of Light strode forward as ordered, and it was but a few moments before streaks of light began hammering at the ground in an advancing wave. The growing narrowness of the valley here ran to their advantage, for once. Less territory to cover. Munitions detonated in plumes of earth and smoke one after another, destroying the traps at the unfortunate cost of breaking up the terrain. Advance would be even more difficult. The enemy waited patiently for them to finish, silhouettes atop the tower unmoving. The murder holes and larger openings for scorpions were bristling with steel, a promise of death yet to come.

"Mages and engines, forward," Klaus told his standard-bearer. "Our vanguard is to prepare for advance on my signal."

Never get into a siege with Praesi, he'd once told his niece. He still believed it, though he had no other choice. The Legions of Terror as forged by the Reforms were one of the finest war machines on the continent, and in this series of valleys he couldn't even use the major advantage his people had over the Empire. Cavalry. Instead he was forced to play to the enemy's strengths, to his distaste, and because of it this was not so much war as a slugging match of piled corpses. Dragged forward, the catapults were set down and panes of

opaque yellow light formed to protect them.

The third battle for the Vales began.

—

"We are witnessing," Grem gravely said, "the birth of a Proceran combined arms doctrine."

Amadeus hummed in agreement.

"It was only a matter of time," he said. "We showed the effectiveness of it during the Conquest. The Principate was too preoccupied with the civil war to catch up, but they've had time to breathe since Hasenbach took power. She gave her uncle free hand to reform the Principate's war doctrine, and Papenheim is no fool. Catherine faced much the same tactics up north."

The old orc grunted unhappily.

"If she'd listened to Istrid's daughter and gone ahead with Bonfire, she wouldn't have had to," he said. "It was a solid plan. Would have taken Procer out of the war, and without the Principate the crusade collapses."

It was a natural consequence of his former apprentice having folded two legions into her Army of Callow that Amadeus had gained plethora eyes and ears among her officer corps. The Duni had mostly used these to keep abreast of her war strategy and arrange his own accordingly. Scribe's agents in her army, on the other hand, had been waging a war with Alaya's own spies in the ranks. He'd preferred passing information to her amusingly-named Jacks rather than carrying out the killings through his own proxies, though on occasion more direct intervention had been needed. He was quite pleased, in fact, with how quickly and solidly her network of spies and assassins had grown. The Thief was proving skilled at the art, though it would be years before the Jacks were in the same league as Alaya's agents or Eudokia's. Penetration in depth was difficult to achieve with such limited time and coin.

"It would have painted a target on her neck for every single hero on the continent," Amadeus replied. "The choice was correct."

"They're already out for her blood, Amadeus," Grem grunted. "It's a crusade, not a petty border dispute."

"The difference is in being a target or *the* target," the green-eyed man said. "No villain can survive the amount of heroic focus Bonfire would have brought. The initial stages would have been a success, but within a few months a band of heroes specifically geared towards killing her would have been grown or assembled."

"A few months would have been enough to cleave Procer in half," Grem said.

"Perhaps," Amadeus shrugged. "But it would have signed her death warrant. She is cleverer than that."

The hint of pride in his voice at that, he did not suppress. His old friend caught it easily enough.

"She stabbed you, Black," he growled. "Don't wave that away as youthful enthusiasm, because *we* certainly haven't."

Eudokia, to his occasional headache, had made that abundantly clear. He'd had to outright order her not to take revenge.

"One who rears a tiger should not complain of stripes," Amadeus quoted in Mtethwa.

"Your tiger put on a crown and raised an army after stealing three legions," Grem growled in Kharsum. "We're past stripes."

"My tiger beat back an army twice the size of hers strengthened by the two most famous living heroes on Calernia," the dark-haired man laughed. "Three legions, one of which was always hers, is a paltry price to pay for that."

"She's going to turn on the Empire, Black," the Marshal warned. "We all know it."

Amadeus leaned against the crenelation as ballistas fired around them, hammering at the shields protecting the Proceran engines. The stones those were lobbing at the tower bounced off harmlessly or shattered. Wekesa had found it an amusing irony that the warding scheme he'd used here was a variation of a Callowan work. The very same that had once protected the walls of Liesse, dispersal of impact across the entire structure. The crusaders could fire at the Twin for months without making a dent, if they did not focus their fire.

"Is the Empire as it currently standsso worthy of survival?" the Black Knight murmured. "I think not. If it cannot adapt, then let it perish. Out of the ashes we will raise something other than a snake devouring its own tail, shattering the world with its throes as it seeks to sate empty hunger."

"Dangerous words," Grem said.

"Yet here you stand," Amadeus said. "Without ever having obeyed your summons back to Ater."

"It's illegal to order a Marshal back from an active war front without evidence of treason," the orc said.

The Duni turned green eyes to his old friend, brow quirking. The orc looked away.

"She won her games," Grem One-Eye finally said. "But she still played them."

They left it at that, eyes returning to the unfolding battle. Papenheim had learned over the last two days the price of an infantry advance on Legion-held fortifications, even with dwarven engines providing cover, but he had little other choice than to repeat the previous performance. He could not starve out the defenders, nor did he have another path than the Vales to march through. The old bottleneck that had kept Procer at bay for centuries was bleeding it once more. Grem ordered for mage fire to be held as the crusader vanguard advanced, passing the engines and charging towards the slope. A handful of heroes were at the front, but Amadeus saw no need to intervene. They'd likely be able to shatter the tower gates if they made it there, but there was the rub. *If.* The orc that was the highest-ranked officer in the Legions of Terror waited until the enemy was fully committed before ordering the mages to send the signal. Up on the mountaintops, faraway, there was an explosion. Months

of work by sappers, all for this single moment. Amadeus counted seventy-nine heartbeats before the water began pouring down from the very discreet channel carved into the mountainside.

There was a deep mountain lake, far out of sight. Digging a tunnel through hard rock and corking it with a dike had been a wonder of goblin engineering. He'd been quite amused, hearing that Catherine had dropped a fae lake atop her enemies up north. What the sappers had devised was not so different. The stream of water, quickened by the slopes, hit the outer edge of the Proceran lines. A few were killed by the sheer weight and momentum, but the real damage came from the spread of water sweeping away everything it touched. And continuing, at that same steady pace. Mages moved their shields to contain the situation, struggling to find the the location the water was pouring from – it was hidden by an illusory ward. All they achieved, in the end, was to contain the flood until the pressure grew beyond the ability of their hodgepodge spell formulas to weather. Priests intervened as well, weaving fences of light, but they were not sufficiently organized to form a comprehensive wall. The water went around it. Surprise, Amadeus mused, was the most dangerous weapon in any army's arsenal. Still, it would not be long before heroes intervened now. There was a flare of Light from Papenheim's camp moments later, and the illusory ward broke. The fences and shields immediately shifted to block off the opening.

"Send the second signal," Grem ordered their signal mage.

A streak of red light splashed across the sky, and twenty heartbeats later another explosion sounded. A chunk of the mountainside broke open and water began pouring again. A plan with a single point of failure, after all, was no plan at all.

"The bouquets?" Amadeus asked.

"As soon as they shift," Grem replied, eyeing the battlefield. "Lukran, tell the sappers I don't want a single Proceran engine on the field to survive this engagement. They're naked as babes in the woods."

Left shieldess, the dwarven machinery was methodically broken down by the goblin-manned ballistas as the Proceran mages and priests refocused their efforts towards the more immediate threat of water. They split, much as Grem had predicted when the general staff had planned this. The mages shielded one entrance, the priests the other. Amadeus personally would have focused on swiftness instead of optimal impact, with heroic intervention being in the cards, but he trusted the orc's instincts.

"Bouquets," Grem ordered with a feral smile.

Sorcery flared as the mages lines wove tendrils of air, each hooked to a heavy wooden barrel. Within moments a hundred of them snaked through the sky, coming to rest above the mages and priests. The spells petered out and the barrels fell. Hasty tongues of holy flame and sundry spells shot up to intercept them, but there were too many targets to handle. Many of them were duds filled with rocks, regardless. Others simple munitions. Of the hundred

barrels, sixty-three fell with impact by Amadeus' count. Twenty-one of those were a mixture of smokers and sharpers, and exploded with billowing poisonous smoke. Twelve were filled with goblinfire, and the battlefield turned into a hellish green landscape in the blink of an eye. The mages and the priests broke, no longer able to hold back the waters, and the streams began to pour out again. Prince Klaus Papenheim had sent eight thousand levies and fantassins as his vanguard, with fourteen mixed catapults and trebuchets to cover them. No engine survived. Fewer than two thousand infantry did.

When night fell over the Vales, it was to the flickering of green flames on still water.

—

"Report," Klaus ordered, exhaustion bare in his voice as he sat slumped in his seat.

Princess Mathilda of Neustria was pushing forty these days. It never surprised him to see it. He remembered Mati as the rambunctious child that had been close as kin with his sister, a mischievous devil in mail skirts that never laughed as brightly as when she was shattering ratling skulls with that monster of a mace she wielded. Neustrians as a rule kept a closer eye on the happenings down south and had been known to twine their lines with those of Brus and Lyonis on occasion – unlike most Lycaonese royalty, who'd sneer at such thinning of the blood – but Mati had never been one to have an interest in courtly games. It was an old compact of the Four Houses that soldiers from the the southernmost Lycaonese principalities would reinforce the walls and fortresses at the border when the thaw came and warbands went on the march, but Mathilda had never been one for half-measures. Every year since her crowning, she'd taken all soldiers not garrisoning the border with Brus to fight the Plague as soon as spring arrived. Klaus did not consider her an exceptional tactician or strategist, but her the sight of her distinctive green armour on the front had a way of lighting a fire in men's bellies. Lycaonese had a well-worn love for royalty that led from the front. The princess' face was streaked with dirt and her short red locks pressed with sweat against her face.

"They dropped the mountain on us, Klaus," the Princess of Neustria told him in Reitz. "The *fucking mountain*."

Klaus leaned forward.

"The Warlock took the field?"

She shook her head.

"We think it was munitions," Mathilda said. "Wasn't sorcery, the mages say, and there were explosions. They must have mined the side through tunnels. I sent in my vanguard and the entire cliffside toppled down on it like some titan's flyswatter."

"Gods Above," the Iron Prince croaked out.

"That bloody dragon made a pass right after, blew fire straight through my priests," she said, passing a tired hand over her face. "The Silver Huntress put

a magic arrow in one of its wings, but it's the only wound it took. It'll be back tomorrow."

"Casualties?" Klaus asked.

"Maybe two thousand dead, twice as many wounded," the princess sighed. "What's left of my priests is getting the wounded back on their feet."

"They went straight after our priests and casters," the Prince of Hannoven said. "They're trying to cripple those before a decisive engagement."

"They're doing well at it, too," Mathilda said. "And I don't need to tell you morale went down the drain. There'll be no volunteers for the vanguard tomorrow, I can tell you that much. Doesn't help that our two alleged heavyweights have been sitting pretty this whole time."

"Chosen logic," Klaus said. "They say the Sovereign of Red Skies and the the Carrion Lord will remain out of the battle so long as they do the same."

"The other Chosen are bloody useless," the Princess of Neustria bluntly replied. "Oh, they're a pretty sight leading the charge. That Levantine girl, the Champion? She's been at the front of every offensive. But we're swinging at mist, Klaus. They can be as good at killing Praesi as they want, we're not fighting Praesi. We're fighting falling mountains, and the Champion's no use there. We need the Witch and the Heavens' hatchet man."

The Lycaonese balked at the notion of needing Chosen to win his battles for him, but there was also truth in this so he held his tongue. Outside, in the distance, water still burned green. Seven days and seven nights, that was said to be the lifespan of goblinfire. Unless he was willing to send his soldiers wading hip-deep in a lake topped by a hell of alchemy, there would be no more offensives in the southern valley. The Praesi would shift their forces accordingly, reinforcing the northern Twin, and there would be no chance breaking through there against the full muster of the Empire's finest.

"Then we will have them," Prince Klaus Papenheim. "Even if I must drag them to the front myself."

—

Hanno had died twenty-one times since morning.

He'd used his aspect in a similar manner before, but those had been shallow readings. The seeking of similarity so he could draw on the experience of his predecessors to make up for his own shortcomings. Never before had he sought lives and memories purely to learn how to kill a man. His enemy had made it difficult, nonetheless. Heroes rarely survived their first encounter with the Black Knight, and those that did were usually engaged by other Calamities on the second meeting. He'd found a single instance, the Rebel Knight, who'd bared her sword at the man twice. Three years after the Conquest, a hidden bastard child of a branch line of House Fairfax who'd inherited the same Name as Eleanor Fairfax herself. Flight after the first engagement had bought her an hour before the Black Knight caught up and slew her in her wounded exhaustion. Some other lives had taught him near nothing of use, like the Merry Brawler – the knife through the back of the neck that'd killed him only served

as a reminder that the Carrion Lord preferred to kill without any struggle if he could. The Unconquered Champion had yielded the greatest amount of information. The Levantine hero had trapped his foe in his domain and teased out more tricks than any other before or after him, in large part because five mortal wounds had been needed before the man died.

Memory by memory, death by death, Hanno had woven together a whole. Sitting with his eyes closed in a tent muted from all noise by Antigone, his sword in his lap, he had studied the many murders of the Black Knight. The man had limitations. Hanno had almost thought otherwise, after their duel in Nicae, but he now saw his mistake. When recalling the skills of his predecessors his plunge had been too shallow. Mere versatility was not sufficient to kill the Carrion Lord, not when he only brought to the fore part of the skills called on. That was, the White Knight now understood, playing the villain's own preferred game. The Black Knight was himself a jack-of-all-trades, facing him with a similar approach would only lead to the victory of the older man's greater experience. The method had been incorrect, and so he had adjusted. Studied the swordsmanship the villain had learned from the Lady of the Lake, the weaknesses of that tutelage. And, upon finding them, Hanno had spent hours seeking the right combination of lives that would allow him to capitalize on those weaknesses. Three would be required: the Flawless Fencer, the Lance of Light and the Barehanded Pugilist.

The sequence was adaptable to the villain's own approach, but the result would ultimately be the same. He'd sought a handful of other lives to draw on as contingencies, should tactics he'd seen employed through other eyes be employed again, and another pair as escape and disengaging sets. Night had fallen, when he emerged from the trance, and he remained seated. Tired down to his bones and struggling to master the lingering echoes of the lives he'd dug so deep into. He would need rest before he was ready to fight. The tent's flap parted and a masked of painted stone topped by long dark tresses stared at him. Antigone, still wearing the face the Gigantes had bestowed upon her. Hanno suspected that of all the host around him, only he understood the significance of that. The favour of the Titans was not lightly earned, and no less terrible than their wroth.

"Hanno," the Witch of the Woods said, her words from no language known to man and yet perfectly understood. "The Champion wishes to speak with you."

The Gift of Tongues never ceased to invoke wonder in him when so displayed. No man or creature that could understand the spoken word would ever fail to understand his friend.

"I am done," the White Knight said, voice rough with disuse. "Come in, both of you."

The inside of his tent was bare save for a bed of straw and his armour, and so he had no earthly comforts to offer either women as they entered. Neither seemed to mind. Antigone disdained any life but that of the wilds, and Rafaella's cheer had already proved undaunted in the face of greater discom-

forts. The Witch's long cloak-tunic pooled around her as she sat gracefully, surrounding herself in coarse green cloth that revealed only sandal-clad feet. Rafaella, on the other hand, slumped down in a cacophony of shuddering armour. The Valiant's Champion snarling badger helm was dropped into the dirt as she shook free the long braid going halfway down her back, her tanned face split in a grin. She was not wearing, for once, the wolf fur cloak she'd claimed from someone that was no wolf at all.

"Have good day, yes?" the Champion said.

Hanno inclined his head.

"I am ready," he said.

"Good," Rafaella hummed. "My day, up and down. Easterners drop mountain on me. Tried to fight it, went not so good."

Hanno glanced at Antigone, her green eyes finding his own through the mask.

"The Legions detonated a cliffside onto the Proceran advance," she said.

The White Knight's fingers clenched. His work had been necessary, but he grieved that it had allowed the Carrion Lord to weave the deaths of so many through his inaction.

"Then dragon came," the Champion continued, sounding noticeably more pleased. "Went on dwarf machine, told soldier: 'Bald Procer man, I stand on machine. Throw me at dragon.'"

Hanno's brow rose.

"I take it he did not," he half-asked.

Rafaella sighed.

"He said 'no, stupid savage, if I do this it kill you'. I say 'maybe if I feeble Procer soldier like you, but am glorious champion of Levant'."

The tanned woman scratched her chin thoughtfully.

"Bald Procer man not happy about that," she mused. "Left and did not reply. Think he complain to tall red princess about it."

The Ashuran snorted. Proceran royalty had avoided him like the plague after the first time he'd been called upon to render judgement in a dispute and a cousin of the the Prince of Orense had been judged as unfit for continued existence by the Seraphim. Oddly enough it had warmed some of the Lycaonese to his presence, though the true gain of the affair had been the end of the insistent invitations to share cups of wine by the rest. He doubted any of what Rafaella had mentioned would be brought to him as a dispute to arbitrate.

"The Warlock still waits," Antigone said. "The Carrion Lord with him. None of our companions ever reached them."

"They were not all meant for this war," Hanno quietly replied. "For many it is beyond the scope of their Fate, bound as they are elsewhere to other works. They must be careful, lest sudden death find them. The Grey Pilgrim is not with us to forgive such mistakes."

Rafaella discreetly traced a sign on her leg at the mention of the Peregrine, expression sobering. To see her act *bashful* when they'd first met the man had been an almost frightening experience.

"You ready now, yes?" the Champion asked. "Time for fight."

"At dawn," Hanno replied calmly. "The fourth day is the beginning."

"*Finally*," the Witch of the Woods murmured.

Hanno of Arwad breathed out slowly. The sentence had already been given.

It must now be carried out, at last.

Interlude: Sing We Of Rage

"Sing we of rage,
In Tower and field
Of this dying age
That will not yield
Sing we of steel,
Forged in the east
As turns the wheel
And carrion feast
Sing we of empire,
For which we bled
Of flickering fire
Now all but dead
Sing we of foe,
Of victories won
And that first woe
Tyranny of the sun
Sing we of ruin,
As again we tread
West, ever pursuing
Fate writ in dread."

'The Tyranny of the Sun', a Praesi song written in the latter stages of the Sixty Years War. Banned by decree of Dread Emperor Nihilis.

Wekesa eyed the sculpted mancala board with a frown, sipping at a chilled Aksum red. The handful of stone seeds in his hand rustled as he flicked his wrist, counting those already sown on the board. Dark eyes moved to Eudokia, whose calm visage betrayed nothing.

"There's two missing," he noted.

Scribe's face displayed only wounded indignation.

"I am insulted, Wekesa, that you would resort to such implications simply because you are afraid to lose," she gravely told him.

"This is senet all over again," he sighed.

In all fairness, he'd been the one to start enchanting dice. Though in his defence, Amadeus had never once played without trying to sneak in a loaded pair and Eudokia had a knack for making pieces disappear when no one was

looking no matter what they played. Hye had tended to 'accidentally' flip the board when it became clear she was losing – even when he spelled them stuck to the table, which rather eliminated plausible deniability for the half-elf. The only one of them who'd ever actually followed the rules had been Sabah, and... Wekesa's face darkened. The passing months had done little to bury the grief of that. A friendship four decades long could not be so easily let go of. Not when her killer still breathed.

"Calm, Wekesa," Scribe quietly said. "Nothing was forgot. Nothing was forgiven."

The dark-skinned man waved his hand in dismissal. He was not Amadeus, to sink into himself at the first sight of anything that would disrupt his composure. He would mourn his old friend properly, and no part of that involved forcing his grief into a box to be addressed only when convenient. He drank deeply from his cup of wine, setting it down. The shiver down his spine that came from someone crossing the wards informed him of Black's arrival before the man strode in sight. Amadeus' eyes studied the board, then crinkled in amusement. Ignoring the Warlock's languid invitation to sit, he leant over it and snorted, a finger flicking at the latest seed Wekesa had sown.

"Someone's in trouble," the pale man lightly said.

Warlock inspected the board again, and unsurprisingly found one of the empty houses now held a seed. That smug bastard.

"You're not even playing," the mage complained.

"It's sad how sore of a loser he is, isn't?" Amadeus told Eudokia with a saddened sigh.

"Hardly becoming of the famous Sovereign of Red Skies," Scribe agreed solemnly.

"You won't get away with this, you perfidious dwarves," Wekesa said. "There will be retribution."

The allegedly dignified Black Knight smothered a grin and finally sat down at their side while Warlock began to put away the stone seeds before he could be conned any further. Eudokia's protests that they had a bottle riding on this and the act was a clear concession went superbly ignored. He wasn't letting those two cheat him out of another prize piece from his cellar. 'Loshe would have his hide if they grabbed another bottle from Kahtan, the current High Lady was curtailing the sales to better hike up the prices. The two savages didn't even enjoy the vintages, anyway, they just loved robbing him blind. He'd nearly cursed Amadeus to lose all taste when he'd seen the man drink a forty-year-old Okoro red with *cabbage and mutton*. In the first Sanguinia's day that would have been a hanging offence, and was a little cannibalism from the Tower really such a high price to pay for proper stewardship of taste? Good and loyal friend that he was, unfortunately, Wekesa still offered Amadeus a cup. The green-eyed man declined, as he usually did when there was a battle on the horizon. Warlock had always considered that a peculiar habit, considering the effects of alcohol could easily be burnt out of the body by any competent Named.

"Onto the sordid business of war, I take it," Wekesa sighed.

"Dawn is an hour away," Amadeus replied. "It has been long enough, and yesterday was a severe defeat for the crusade. The real threats will come out today."

"Your request has been ready for near a month," the sorcerer shrugged. "The array as well. I foresee no trouble there."

"I have no worry of that," his old friend said. "I came to speak of the Witch of the Woods."

"Of which we know precious little," Wekesa pointed out, though his gaze flicked to Scribe.

She shook her head.

"As far as we know she has spent most her life in the Foloi forest, which is beyond our reach," she said. "Attempting to gather intelligence in Gigantes territory is an exercise in futility. They kill everything that crosses the border without warning. All the Eyes have been able to gather is second-hand, overheard conversations. And even these are rare, save for the unreliable."

The Warlock sipped at his wine, unmoved. It would not be the first time they faced a heroine whose history was essentially a blank slate. It did make the killing more troublesome, but not overwhelmingly so.

"If she was truly taught by Gigantes spellsingers, she will be using Ligurian formulas," Wekesa said. "I'll concede that for greater workings they are without match, but they lack the flexibility and breadth of Trismegistan sorcery."

"Those greater workings are my exact worry," Amadeus said. "I remember my histories, Wekesa. The last time spellsingers fought with a Named Praesi sorcerer, plains large as half of Callow were turned into the Titan's Pond."

"I am hardly Triumphant," Warlock chuckled. "And the Witch is no true spellsinger. She has not spent a few hundred years accumulating power and perfecting her craft. There will be collateral damage, to be sure, but I did not toil for months on our warding schemes to protect your armies from dwarven toys."

Black inclined his head in concession, but his eyes were not in agreement.

"I would not bind your hands on your first encounter with an unknown quantity," he said.

"Yet," Wekesa said.

"We cannot afford the losses that large escalation might entail," Amadeus said. "I won't bar you from using sorcery falling under Red Skies protocol, but I'd ask that you keep in mind the possible consequences of it."

The dark-skinned mage finished his cup, rather irked that such good vintage must be treated in so cavalier a manner. War truly was hell, he mused. Setting down the silver, he offered his friends a mild smile.

"I will attempt coddling, then," Wekesa conceded. "Let us see how long *that* lasts. And what will you be doing while I get my hands dirty?"

"Settling a philosophical question, in a manner of speaking," he said.

Warlock raised an eyebrow.

"And what would that question be?"

Amadeus smiled that old smile of the damned, the one that had been the ruin of realms and the death of armies. A madman's smile.

"Can a man cheat providence at dice?"

—

The army had risen in hushed silence, but Hanno could feel the thrum of excitement going through the soldiers. Yesterday's defeat had put fear in the hearts, yes, but also thirst for retribution. The vicious schemes of the Praesi had given birth to the old wroth that was always the fall of Evil, that burning determination that came from witnessing the senseless destruction sown by the Enemy. *Yet they are not so senseless, these monsters*, the White Knight thought. That they were abominations could not be denied, the paramount fiends of this era, but Hanno had studied the Carrion Lord. The man's actions followed his own barren sense of integrity, though no one sane would truly apply that word to the works of the Black Knight. It made him dangerous in a way that few villains the White Knight had witnessed could be. No less mad than the Emperors of old, perhaps, but there was cold method to the madness. Hanno had learned the hard way that underestimating the Calamities on the field would only lead to death. He thought of the sisters he would never hear again, snatched out of Creation before they had truly lived. *We give you nothing*, the Seraphim had promised as they anointed him. *We take everything*. As in all things, they had spoken truth.

Antigone stood crouched on the ground, watching the burning waters. Pyres of green flames that were birthed beneath the surface and spread from there, unheeding of the laws that bound true fire. There was nothing in the world, they said, that goblinfire could not burn. Some priests in Procer had called the substance the distillation of unholy hunger, the sins of the East made into liquid flame. The impossibly massive wolf that the Witch's mount and mother both was lying on the ground, her muzzle resting on her paws as she warily watched the heroine she had raised weave sorcery. Lykaia, her name was. Hanno had expected the Champion to started eyeing her as pelt and trophy the moment they first met, but to his surprise Rafaella had swiftly taken to the wolf-mother. The opposite was also true, Antigone assured him, though it could be hard to tell. Lykaia's notion of mothering occasionally involved being batted around by massive paws, though in all honesty the Champion seemed to rather enjoy that. Perhaps he should have anticipated that Rafaella would be utterly delighted at the opportunity of wrestling with a she-wolf larger than most houses. Antigone sliced across her palm with a stone knife and pressed the blood into the earth. Hanno felt the shiver of power scatter around them, massive and then gone.

Lykaia whined until Antigone sighed and presented her bleeding hand for the she-wolf to lick, almost nudging the Witch off her feet with an affectionate nuzzle he suspected was a reminder to take better care of herself. Wiping away the slobber covering not only her hand but most her arm – though, Hanno

noted, the wound already seemed to be closing – the Witch of the Woods bowed her head to him by the slightest fraction. She did not move like a human. She was a beast of the forest, at times, but at others he could only see the Gigantes in her. Chin tucked in, if hidden by the mask, crown of the head made slightly lower than his. *Respect-deference-accomplishment.* The giants could express broader nuances of relation and hierarchy in a single gesture that the land of his birth could with millennia of tiered citizenship. Hanno kept his back straight and tilted his face slightly to the left without moving his neck. *Praise-gratitude-companionship.* He was careful not to move too far left, lest he imply subordination on his part. By the mores of the Gigantes, what he had offered was already intimate warmth. Antigone's head straightened into neutrality, though slowly enough the implication lay she was pleased with his response.

"It is done," the Witch said. "When you are ready."

Hanno breathed out, watching the spread of burning green before him. He unsheathed the sword at his hip, mere steel forged at the hands of men. The lance strapped on his back would remain there until it was needed.

"Now," the White Knight said.

Antigone stomped her feet on the ground, where her blood still lingered, and Creation howled. She did not control it, not the way a spellsinger would have. The Witch had not spent centuries permeating her body with the light of moons and stars, woven a second soul out of sunlight or aligned herself with the celestial spheres. She could not sing hymns to the world and make it dance to her will. Instead the power of her aspect flared, and for a moment she was one with the fabric of Creation. A single cord sounded where she had spilled blood, and the vibration reverberated beyond mortal understanding. The winds stirred the burning lake and quickened until a whirlwind of water and fire was birthed, emptying the grounds where so many had died yesterday. The Praesi's own murderous alchemy, turned against them as it went howling towards the tower men called the Bloody Twin. Hanno of Arward began his advance, endless ranks of crusaders behind him, as sorcery bloomed ahead.

—

"Okeanos Risen," Wekesa said, reluctantly impressed. "Using an unseemly shortcut, but still nothing to sneer at."

Especially on freshwater. He'd never heard of Gigantes using this particular working away from the sea. Ashurans, when they'd still been Baalites in more than name, had learned the hard way that attempting to invade the Titanomachy from the water only resulted in the sharks growing fat. There was no audience atop the tower for him to expound at, as Amadeus had ordered room be cleared for him to work undisturbed, but speaking his thoughts aloud did tend to bring a sense of satisfaction to his work. He'd gotten into the habit when teaching Masego, as it helped his son understand his conclusions if he was privy to the thoughts that led to them. It was unfortunate that Masego still lingered at Foundling's side, though Wekesa had made his peace with it. Much of his enmity for the girl had ebbed since she'd thrown away her appren-

ticeship to Amadeus and ceased being a dagger at his throat simply by existing. Eudokia was furious that process had involved their old friend being stabbed, but Warlock was not particular bothered. Not since he'd noticed that Black's agelessness had taken a tint of youth in the aftermath. She'd offered his first and oldest friend a second lease on life by her actions, and he considered that to settle the balance of the threat she'd once posed.

She'd still have to die, of course. Alaya would insist on it as soon as the politics of the act became acceptable. It would make a bit of a mess, but those two would bind their wounds and entwine their fates anew after enough time had passed. They always did, no matter what shallow wounds they managed to inflict on the other's pride. Perhaps it was in order that he suggest Amadeus spend a few years in Refuge, after the dust settled. It would do wonders for both his mood and Hye's – Wekesa was of the opinion she'd cease gallivanting around the continent picking fights with gods for a bit if she found her lover returned to her bed. Alaya would be miffed at losing her right hand to a 'vapidly murderous vagrant', as she'd once described Ranger to him, but Wekesa was rather miffed at her himself. This whole Liesse affair had been gauche in many ways, including the implied insult to him. That she'd never approached him about building such a doomsday device implied she'd believed he would refuse her and go straight to Amadeus. It was a disregard of the trust he'd thought there was between them. He was not inflicted with Eudokia's blinders, to believe Black should be crowned. Alaya was better fit to rule Praes, and more apt to deliver the peace and quiet that was his preferred state of affairs.

Warlock had no intention of spending the next two decades of his life breaking millennia-old wards, banishing demons and immolating every practitioner in the Wasteland with a modicum of talent for theoretical research. Which was the very likely consequence of a reform-inclined Duni climbing the Tower. That killing one of his few friends as a prerequisite only made the notion more unpalatable, as did his suspicion that Amadeus crowned would find everything admirable about him devoured by the demands of the throne. Shaking the thought, Wekesa waited for the whirlwind to properly and come within the preferred action range of his prepared answers. The addition of goblinfire to the assault was a clever improvisation on the part of the enemy, and did indeed complicate matters of containment. The alchemical flames would begin devouring any solid ward upon contact, and a working of this strength could not be easily be contained with a flawed warding scheme. That was not to say, of course, that there was nothing he could do. Screens of sorcery bloomed before him as he observed the strings of power that had initiated and now maintained the whirlwind. Examining the formula directly was not a real possibility at this range, but he *could* glean from understanding of it from the observable phenomenon.

The central element was clearly a Creational cascade, the signature element of Ligurian sorcery. A controlled released of power into the world that accumulated ever-deeper orders of effect. The main difference with records of

Gigantes sorcery was that there seemed to be no guiding element at play, no 'song' – though that was merely a mundane and narrow term for what was in reality an exquisitely complicated verbal control technique. Interesting. Ligurian sorcery required the caster to have a deep understanding of Creation's workings that Praesi would call High Arcana, though the way Gigantes understood the world in a fundamentally different manner meant there was little overlap with Praesi High Arcana and the Titanomachy's preceding equivalent. The implication here being that the Witch of the Woods, though taught by the Gigantes, did not share their inherent understanding. Aspect-based bridging, most likely, relying on her Name to expand the capacity of her mind. Aspects did tend to be passing, however, and that would explain the lack of so-called song: the Witch had glimpsed the web when calling on her power, but had not kept that understanding afterwards. Once loosed, her control on her spells was either thin or non-existent.

"How kind of you, my dear," Warlock murmured, "to gift me a whirlwind."

Runes formed around his wrists as he set boundaries in the area the winds were about to enter, weaving the forces that would attempt to modify rather than disperse. A hundred feet from the tower, the working fell into his ward and without a word Wekesa activated it. The first part was elementary: he stretched the spinning upwards, thinning the board whirlwind into a much taller pillar-like structure. From there, effect was easier. The forces were dispersed where they had once been concentrated. He flattened the pillar into a sphere and tossed back the burning water and winds in the direction of the advancing enemy army.

"Do try to make this interesting, child," Warlock said.

Power flared, and this time he was able to watch the cascade unfolding. It was beautiful, he thought, in the way only the very highest of sorcery could be. A single mind touching a facet of the godhead through will and knowledge. The burning sphere shivered and winked out, leaving nothing behind. His eyes narrowed. Matter could not simply vanish, and there had been absolutely nothing left behind – not even air, as the absence had drawn it in. The cascade had not been a physical effect, which meant...

"The Riddle of Kreios," he said softly. "Now *that* is a memory I will have to extract and study."

The Witch of the Woods had inflicted the passing of time inside boundaries, which was masterfully absurd. One of the great riddles of sorcery was that there was no such thing as time – it was a sapient construct, a recognition of entropy – yet there was a force that could only be called this that could be manipulated by magic. The Witch had enveloped the sphere inside folded time until the goblinfire devoured everything within, a beautiful parry. Had she called on Kronia's Sickle instead the alchemy would have attempted to devour the time actively quelling it but Kreios relied in the conceptual passing of time, not destruction through it. An important distinction, one that had crafted an envelope instead of an attack: she'd let the goblinfire itself do the

work, an elegant solution. And one made possible only by his actions. If he'd not gathered the goblinfire together and she'd employed the Riddle, entire parts of this mountain range would have vanished – and likely parts of her army with it. No mere spell-slinging savage, this one.

"Let us test the depths of your knowledge, then," the Sovereign of Red Skies grinned, and runes burned around his wrists.

—

Hanno led the assault without looking at the sorcerer's duel echoing across the valleys. He would trust in Antigone, that she was the match of the Warlock and would allow no harm to come to them. He'd acted to ensure that much, by sending all other heroes to the northern valley. With only he and the Witch present, Creation's grooves would not be filled with a plethora different stories that all weakened each other by allowing none to be come into the fullness of being. The Witch of the Woods would fight the Warlock. The White Knight would fight the Black Knight. The clarity of this would be as dangerous a blade as the one in his hand. In the Twin above engines and crossbows spewed death at the advancing crusaders, checked only by the shields of mages and the fences of priests. Praesi sorceries lashed at them both, tearing holes that were filled with steel and stone with eerie coordination. It did not matter. With him at their head, the crusaders roared and advanced. Sword bright with the Light, the White Knight pushed through storms of fire and clouds of poison. They dispersed like mist under the sun. Darkness fell in a rain of needles, men they pierced convulsing in violent throes, but Hanno screamed his challenge and they shattered like glass.

"Carrion Lord," he yelled as in the sky above lightning fought spinning lights. "**I summon you, Black Knight**."

His words rang like a thunderclap across the valley. A gauntlet thrown, and not easily refused. Not without consequences greater than whispers of cowardice. A duel of champions for Above and Below was an ancient thing, and not disdained without earning the same disdain from the Gods. The gates of barded steel and iron at the foot of the tower slowly opened. Out came a silhouette riding a dead horse. His plate was simple and worn, his lance a thing of blackened steel and the sword at his hip goblin-wrought steel. As he rode a dark cloak streamed behind him. The helm, as always, hid his face save for eerie green eyes and hints of pallid skin. Bringing up his shield, the Black Knight moved as the gates closed in his wake. Hanno felt it, the cold thing behind the flesh. The cogs of steel ever-turning. His power was faint, even fainter than on their last encounter, but the taste of it had not changed. The presence of two aspects wreathed the man like two ravens on his shoulders, urging the villain to Lead and to Conquer. An old monster drenched in blood, come at his summons.

"It ends today," the White Knight said.

The monster cocked his head to the side.

"Uninspired," he replied, and the lance descended.

Lives flooded through Hanno's mind and he chose the first he had prepared: the Lance of Light. His Name took his reflexes, his training, and replaced them with another man's. The Knight went deeper still, until his eyes no longer felt as his own, and only then did the Light boil out of him. The radiant mount pawed at the grounds, scorching them, and his lance rose to match the abominations. Hanno was no jouster but Felix Caen, Duke of Liesse, had been the glory of Callow's knighthood long before he led the doomed charge in the East that earned him his Name. The stance came easy to him as breathing and he watched the Black Knight lead his mount to face him. There should have been a hush over the battlefield, but no quarter was offered or given. The Legions still spewed death from the tower, though their crossbows and engines were alien to him. No less, he thought, should be expected from Praesi. There was no honour to the Wasteland, nothing but barren hatred to be found past the Blessed Isle.

"Come, slave of the Tower," the Lance of Light laughed. "Breaker of heroes. Come and die."

The mounts charged, death flying around them, and it was all wrong. It should have been an olive-skinned southerner, a vicious lady of the Hungering Sands with lips like fresh blood, not this pale leech before him. He would crush the thing anyway. Already the Lance could see the sequence, the alignment of men and horse, the way the tip of his lance would go through the throat. Then the man's shield went down, hand hidden, and the Lance of Light spurred his horse. Death, death was offered to him and he would deliver it in the name of House Alban. Then the Praesi threw himself off his horse at the last moment.

A heartbeat later, as the Lance passed by it, it *exploded.*

Hanno landed on his back, breath stolen from him and smouldering. He hastily rose to his feet and found the Black Knight awaiting him with the flat his sword resting on his shoulder.

"That remains a *surprisingly* effective trick," the monster mused. "I really should send her a thank you note."

The White Knight frowned. He was talking. Bantering, instead of pressing advantage. Pale green eyes flicked to him.

"Shall we get on with it?" the Carrion Lord drawled. "There *is* a war on, in case you hadn't noticed."

"You," Hanno said. "What have you done?"

"Blown up a rather expensive horse," the Black Knight said. "With the dark and wicked spell of wick and cheap matches. My coffers aren't what they used to be. Tremble, White Knight, for my power is truly boundless within reasonable limits."

The White Knight bared his sword, and let the Flawless Fencer flow into him. His stance changed. Sofia of Nicae had always been heavyset, nothing like the slender girls whose beauty was praised by the men, but she did not mind. Her only true love was the blade. This one was well-fitter to her hand, the weight of it perfect for her craft, and she closed the distance with

anticipation thrumming in her veins. Praesi, this man, but she'd killed that ilk before. Bands of them had kept roving the Free Cities for years after the Dread Empress was unceremoniously thrown back into the sea by the coalition. It was not as satisfying to slay those as Ashurans, but it would keep her sated until supper. The foe was a sword-and-board man, and not half-bad. He danced properly when she struck, his parry technically perfect and riposte appropriately vicious. She elegantly turned it downwards, then struck across the throat. Ah, just a little too slow. She was off her form today. She circled around him, letting the slope weaken his stance, and offered a feint towards the eye. The shield went up, she closed the distance even as he struck and spun with him as he adjusted. Elbow to the back of the head, then she dropped under his answering swing and hit his helm with the pommel of her blade.

The man worked through the pain, but his stance was broken. She drew blood at the juncture of his elbow, slid around the shield bash and hacked down on the extended fingers of his blade hand. She hummed approvingly when he decided he'd rather lose two fingers than the grip on his sword, then rewarded his courage by kicking his knee and forcing him down. He swung where she would have been, were she an idiot, but instead she kicked dirt into his face. Then, as he struggled with that, she kicked his chin and laid him down hard. Time to end this, then. The Flawless Fencer vanished back into the flood and the White Knight clasped his sword.

"You are not him," Hanno said.

"A question almost theological in nature," the thing noted. "Nefarious did have a certain knack for blasphemy."

"This is a trick," the White Knight hissed. "You shy from judgement."

"Shall I give you a lesson, child?" the abomination said. "I so rarely get to monologue, but this is fortunate happenstance. You see, whatever I tell you will not matter. Not in the slightest. You are, by your nature, incapable of learning what I would teach. If you did it would destroy what a more poetic man might call your soul."

Hanno grabbed him by the throat, raised him up. The thing laughed.

"What have you done?"

"Agency, boy," the abomination said, sounding amused. "You have discarded yours like a petty bauble and never once considered the *cost*. Blind faith is such tempting notion, isn't it? Being able to believe in an answer, in a force, without ever questioning it. Certainty and blindness. I have always wondered at the difference."

"Where are you?"

"Ah, already better," the thing said approvingly. "But your true question is – why did you ever think I was here? And so the circle closes, and we return to the matter of faith."

He could have squeezed, snapped the neck, but he needed to know. To understand the trap so he could break it.

"The answer, of course, is providence," the abomination said. "You are here because that elusive golden luck of heroes told you I would be here to face you. And I am, in a sense. That is the rub, you see, when one relies on something one does not fully understand. If you do not know the rules, you do not know how they can be *cheated*."

"You cannot cheat the Heavens," Hanno snarled.

"Ah, but providence is a different matter," the villain said. "It is a force, you see, not an intelligence. It cannot reason. If the greater part of what is me is here before you, well, that is the guidance it will provide. Never warning you that a mind and a body are very different things until it is much, much too late."

And just like that it fell into place.

"You are in the other valley," the White Knight said.

"Praesi, Hanno, have so many flaws," the abomination mused. "Sometimes it seems as if it is all we have. Yet there is one among them that I always believed to be a virtue, in its own way. All it takes is the faintest hope we will get away with it, and we will sit across even the Gods, smile and *lie*."

"There is nowhere I will not reach you," Hanno replied quietly.

He dropped the abomination, and it did not even attempt to rise. Its lips quirked into a smile, thin and narrow and vicious. A blade-smile.

"Do enjoy your victory, White Knight," he said.

When Hanno's blade cut through his neck, the body already had empty eyes.

—

Amadeus of the Green Stretch breathed out. After a moment he rose to his feet. The sounds of battle could be heard at the bottom of the northern Twin, heroes and crusaders having reached the gate and struggling to break it. Ranker was behind him, looking to the back of the tower, and without a word he went to join her. Both of them stared down.

"Is it done?" the old goblin asked.

"They are both committed," the green-eyed man replied. "My death was the agreed-on signal. Warlock will cover the retreat."

"Then now is our part," the Marshal of Praes said.

"So it is," the Black Knight agreed.

They looked down at the two legions that had moved to the northern passage overnight, swelling the ranks of the three already under Ranker's command. Amadeus bared his sword, raising it high. The responding clamour drowned out the world.

"Well, old friend," he murmured. "I think it's about time we went on the offensive, don't you think?"

Interlude: Lest Dawn Fail

"The moon rose, midnight eye
Serenaded by the owl's cry
In Hannoven the arrows fly
Hold the wall, lest dawn fail
No southern song for your ear
No pretty lass or merry cheer
For you only night and spear
Hold the wall, lest dawn fail
Come rats and king of dead
Legions dark, and darkly led
What is a grave if not a bed?
Hold the wall, lest dawn fail
Quell the tremor in your hand
Keep to no fear of the damned
They came ere, and yet we stand
So we'll hold the wall,
Lest dawn fail."

Lycaonese folk song, origins unknown, dated before annexation by the Principate

"Walk me through it," Marshal Ranker of the Hungry Dog tribe said.

She still thought of herself by that name, though her tribe was decades dead. She'd slain it with her own two hands, conscripting every male of fighting fit and taking them up north to throw her lot with the rebels of the civil war that enthroned Malicia. The matron-attendants, women and children had been split among other tribes according to ties of kinship, the ancient records of the Hungry Dogs sent down into the dark beneath the Eyries to add to the ever-swelling chronicles of the fallen and the failures. The Black Knight flicked those eerie green eyes at her, unreadable.

"You were briefed on the plan before we followed it," he reminded her. "You saw it unfold."

He spoke Lower Miezan with that slight burr to his voice that was the mark of Callowans and Duni both, one of the thousand reasons Wastelands used to look down on the pale-skinned westerners.

"I know the plan as it was told us," the old goblin said. "That is the surface. Tell me the underpinnings, how it was woven together."

It was a guilty pleasure of hers, to tease out the inner workings of her old friend's mind. The cold method in it was like poppy to her kind, cunning viciousness put to murderous purpose. Had he been born of her people, Ranker would have killed anyone with the slightest claim on him and made the man her consort. There were still matrons in the Eyries that whispered he was utterly wasted on *humans*, a species whose idea of thought was laughable at the best of times. Broad-teeth monkeys who stumbled through Creation blindly, never a moment of their lives aware of how fragile and vulnerable they were until the Gobbler swallowed them whole. Amadeus, though? Oh, he ever slept with one eye open. A frail creature surrounded by a sprawling world of hostile demigods, he was the closest that misbegotten species would ever get to whelping one of her people.

"Is there a point?" the dark-haired man mused. "Already it has ended."

"There is always a point," she said, and bared her yellow teeth at him. "I learn, you learn. All rise."

His own words, these last few, thrown back into his lap. One of their very fist conversations, years before she sacrificed her reign to earn yet greater victory. The glint in his eyes turned amused. That would not have been enough to ply him, in the old days, but Captain was lost and Scribe currently set to other purpose. He would speak. The urge was there for all villains, and she was providing him a culvert that did not endanger him or his designs. The threats had passed with the coming of night, though dawn would bring them anew.

"There were three forces to reckon with, in this scheme of mine," the Black Knight said. "The first was the heroes in the northern valley."

Nine slayers sworn under the Heavens, leading the assault of the crusaders. The Legions had protocols to face these, but not in so great a number. Though far from invincible, they were a mighty force.

"Great power on the march," Ranker said.

"At the time, significant only as an accumulation of strength," the green-eyed man noted. "By gathering together without a single unifying story, they stripped themselves of Above's protection. They made themselves *fallible*."

"But remained a significant force," she probed.

"That is so," he agreed. "And they would have become truly dangerous if they were allowed to turn into the rear guard for the retreating army of Procer. Nine heroes, facing the horde? Most would have perished, but at the cost of thousands on our part. Therefore, they had to be dispersed."

"Costly to achieve through force of arms," Ranker commented.

"Ah, but this was no heroic band," the Black Knight said. "Simply an assembly of heroes. And so, in the absence of a clearly dominant Named or a unifying threat, they developed a point of failure: lack of chain of command. Without central authority giving orders, the heroes had to rely on their personal judgement when presented with a choice. Judgement that was shaped

by wildly different origins and cultures. There would be no unified response. To disperse the cluster of heroes, then, we needed only present them with a decision."

"The Tenth," Ranker smiled.

—

"O Great Destroyer," Legate Obasi said, kneeling at his general's feet. "The time has come to strike."

The ancient creature known as Nekheb let out a sigh, nearly sending him tumbling down the slope. Scales like midnight and eyes of gold that stood tall as a horse, the dragon was one of the living wonders of Creation. Magic made flesh, holiest of all the children of the Gods.

"I was just getting comfortable," General Catastrophe said, wiggling in its nest of melted stone. "It can wait until tomorrow."

Obasi had learned to understand the mood of his draconic master and winced at the tone. In court such a visible betrayal of his thoughts would have been disgraceful, but Holy Nekheb had never bothered to learn to read the faces of men. It was beneath them, admittedly. The dark-skinned legate still panicked at the idea that his general might decide to slumber then and there. It might be for mere hours, but there was no guarantee. After the Conquest the ancient creature had slumbered for seven months on the Blessed Isles and eaten anyone trying to wake it. The Soninke's predecessor had been stuck in the very uncomfortable position of needing to explain that to the Tower.

"The scheme of the Carrion Lord is in need or your greatness, O Peerless Ancient," Obasi tried. "Without your grace, the might of the Empire can only fail today."

The massive dragon clicked its teeth unhappily.

"This is true," they conceded. "You are all idiot hatchlings."

Legate Obasi prostrated himself, sincerely hoping no rivulet of liquid rock would make it down to him while he did.

"Your discernment is without rival, O Mighty One," he said. "Yet have the men of Procer not defied your greatness? Only yesterday, did one of their own not attempt to slay you?"

The dragon's nostrils flared.

"An archer," it rumbled. "I *hate* archers. They're worse than sea snakes, though not nearly as clever. You speak true, minion-thing. I name you one of my heralds for the worth of your advice."

This made it the third instance this year the legate was granted this boon. Holy Nekheb had some difficulty telling apart humans, he had come to suspect. Or simply did not care enough to try. Obasi stayed prostrated as long as he could, though he had to hastily crawl away when the dragon rose to its feet and spread its wings. The master took flight without further deigning to engage in conversation and the legate hurried towards the rest of the officer cabal. The other necromancers looked as exhausted as he did, even though they'd inhaled one strengthening concoction after another during the night on the march. The

Carrion Lord had sent the Tenth Legion into mountains that separated the valleys north and south, and only a mere bell ago had they reached their destination. Beneath the cliff they stood atop fortifications could be glimpsed, walls and towers and some peasant bastion. No living host could had taken the hard paths through ravines and harsh slopes the Tenth Legion had marched through in the dark, but theirs was not the strength of the living. Only a mere three hundred of their legion drew breath, and they'd been the ones to trail behind as the undead advanced silently. Obasi gestured for one of the corpses to bend and sat on its armoured back, catching his breath.

"The Great Master takes the field," he said.

"They were in a mood?" Legate Kalaman asked.

"Settling down for a nap," Obasi sighed.

They shared a grimaced.

"Well, the crusaders will know we're here soon enough," Kalaman said, brushing back her dark tresses. "Best we get the dead moving before they send the rear guard after us."

The sorcerers huddled together and wove their magic, taking the reins of the army spread across the mountains.Silently, inexorably, Legion X Horribilis began to climb down the cliffs.

Towards the lightly-guarded enemy camp.

—

"Some would stay," the Black Knight said. "But few. Undead and a dragon would by the lure of promised victory. The Procerans would shortly panic, realizing they had lost their camp and risked encirclement."

Ranker sucked at her teeth, pleased at the cunning involved. That part had unfolded exactly as he said. Of the nine heroes leading the host, only four had remained when Nekheb appeared behind the crusaders and displayed his wroth. The rest had hurried back to kill the draconic general before it could slaughter the entire rear guard. The gates of the Twin had opened when they were too far to easily return, and out had poured the Legions of Terror. The sortie had run straight into the four heroes and been stopped cold as the four Named scythed through legionaries like ripe wheat. Impressive, but ultimately doomed. It took five mage lines assembled for ritual to drive them back, but back they were driven. From there, the steel wrote the song. Veteran legions under Grem's personal command hammered through the levies at the front until they broke and fled, collapsing the lines of fantassins behind them. The actual casualties the Procerans took, by Ranker's reckoning, were fairly light for a rout. Two, maybe three thousand. It was the enemy commander that salvaged the mess, riding down with her Neustrian cavalry to put iron in southern spines. The moment the front was stable she ordered a full retreat, the Legions in close pursuit.

The rest of the morning was spent breaking a sequence of holding actions by the Procerans as the crusaders tossed away men trying to slow the Legions. Heroes swelled those ranks more often than not, but they were offered the

greatest of all insults: irrelevance. They stood proud and powerful, unbroken by the steel of the Legions. Yet the men died around them as they did, and they could not hold back an army by themselves. It was unfortunate that heroic presence meant the trade of lives involved always sharply in favour of the Procerans, but it was the trade of casualties for a tactical advantage and so had remained acceptable in Ranker's eyes. More so because, all the while, the Tenth Legion had been forming at their back. Nekheb allowed itself to be chased away when the heroes arrived spoiling for a fight, but by then nearly three thousand undead were on the ground. The heroes engaged as reinforcements continued to climb down, preventing further advance but little else. They were still fighting when the first ranks of the Proceran retreat arrived shortly after Noon Bell.

"Winning the battle was not the objective," Ranker said.

"Not at that juncture," Amadeus agreed. "There was a temptation, I will not deny. With the Tenth in the camp, there was no real chance for the crusaders to man the fortifications. Which were built to face the opposite direction of our advance, regardless. If I'd taken the field myself and we'd pressed the advantage, we would have slain a great many of them."

"You didn't," Ranker said.

"Because it would have been committing too early," Black said. "The second force to reckon with had not yet been neutralized. It would have left us exposed if we'd acted without considering her."

"The Witch of the Woods," the old goblin said.

—

The tower had cracked, like wet clay left too long under the sun. Wekesa still felt dismay at the memory. It had been purely kinetic force, that much he'd ascertained, but there had been no record of such a working in the Tower's scrolls and his study of the creational cascade had failed to divine anything useful. He'd tied the tower's protective wards into the the flanking mountains after the first blow, but all that had achieved was the powdering of at least half a ton of stone when the Witch struck again. There'd been few legionaries left inside, by then, but those that remained were instantly pulped by the impact. Warlock had been wary enough he'd moved out of the tower towards the mountains, and it was the only reason he wasn't dead. The Procerans had swarmed the broken tower, afterwards, but most of the legion that'd defended it had already retreated. It was all he'd promised Amadeus, and he gave it no more thought after that. That pair of spells had heralded the escalation of the duel into a higher realm of arcana, and the failure of his defence had forced him to go on the offensive.

More than an hour had passed since then, Wekesa thought, and he idly adjusted the bubble of force around him to dampen sound as the peak to his left exploded.

Illusions were allowing him to keep one step ahead. The girl had a working that allowed her to see through them – Dion's Gaze, he recognized – but she had to abandon her offensive to find him every time she used it. She'd fol-

lowed him into the mountains, and now they could fight without concern for their surroundings. A storm brewed in the sky above them, this one not of his making. He could feel it strengthening, the lightning concentrating in a killing stroke she would cast down when she found him. Her casual shattering of mountaintops was an attempt to flush him out, though an unsuccessful one so far. Wekesa had been biding his time thinning boundaries to place his own killing blow, allowing her the run of the range. There was advantage in making her act in the open, as he now intended to demonstrate. With the storm now nearing its peak, the conditions had become acceptable.

"**Imbricate**," he said.

Seven-hundredth and twenty-second Hell. A hellscape of unending sprawling tempests, bereft of all devils save those who crawled beneath the earth. His thoughts burned as he oversaw the alignment, blood thrumming with sorcery, until Hell and Creation snapped into place. It had been wise precaution to mute sound, Warlock decided, for the howl of wind was deafening. Lightning thundered down, hundreds of strands, and flashing lights danced across the peaks. The roar of avalanches by the dozens devoured the rest of the song and he laughed, runes shining around his wrists as he wove the lightning into spears and struck at the Witch. The murderous child took it in stride, force spinning around her and making a wheel of the power he sent at her. She released it when his strikes ebbed, released a ring of pure lightning that shattered another two peaks. As he rode the storm, so did she. Discarding any notion of digging him out of his hole, she called on the Helian Sun and parted the storm with dawn's coming. Scorching light burned all in sight, but destruction was an old friend to Wekesa. He knew it better than her.

"**Reflect**," he hissed.

His mind spun, sights in the thousands flooding it, until he found the realm he'd sought. The most beautiful of his tricks, the one truest to the essence of sorcery. A lie told Creation: that its lay was as that of the Hell he had sought, as if they were perfect reflection. No great toil of alignment here, only the barest of efforts as he matched the realms. The sky went crimson, great shapes forming in depths that did not exist within Creation, and hellflire began to rain. The Witch would learn today why men had named him Sovereign of Red Skies.

—

"The landslides cost us more than them," Ranker said.

Amadeus conceded the point with an inclination of the head. As well he should. The last word from the Ninth was that Sacker had lost over seven hundred to an avalanche. While a mile away from the duel of the mages. Her entire rear guard swallowed by rocks, along with more than a few engines. In the northern valley, the costs had been no less steep. The mage officers of the Tenth had still been in the mountains when the two Named had begun slinging their spells, and half of them had been lost making their escape even as the battle around the Proceran camp erupted. The matron had forgot quite how terrifying Warlock could be, when let loose, but for all that terror the Witch

had been every bit his match. And in their struggle, they had wrecked the Vales beyond recognition. The southern Twin was buried in stone along with most the valley before it, while a stray lance of lightning had hit the peak above the northern one, making half the mountain collapse atop it. That alone would not have cut retreat entirely for the Legions, but then Warlock had begun throwing down mountains to replace those he'd broken and it had gotten much, much worse. Half a city's worth of brimstone had tumbled down the slope of the northern valley after being batted aside contemptuously by the Witch of the Woods, and there was no going around *that*.

Even now they could not be certain of how much of the Vales had been wrecked by what was already being called the Waltz of Wroth. Both passes were now closed, that much was certain, but scrying across the broken mountain range had proved impossible and so no fresh report could be had from General Sacker. Assuming she was still alive.

"Only the third force remained in play, after that," Black noted. "It was always going to be the most difficult to predict, as its nature was bound to be reactive. In a sense, Wekesa's enthusiasm was a boon. It created an obvious opening, and the Heavens never can resist a spectacular entrance."

"Militarily speaking, the entire notion was absurd," Ranker said. "If one of my staff officers suggested such a thing, I would have them demoted back to the ranks."

"That there would be intervention was a given," Amadeus said. "We were, at that point, winning. The Tenth weakened when we lost the officers, but Nekheb was still looming and we had them bottled up."

The Princess of Neustria had exerted herself all morning in the prevention of a rout, but when the battle around the camps unfolded she'd plunged back into the deeps. It was a simple question of room. There were only two gates allowing entry into the fortifications where the Procerans had placed their camp, and limited space within. It'd been impossible for her to get a significant portion of her host through before the Legions under Grem hit her back, and from there the beginnings of a massacre had taken place. The crusaders had trampled each other trying to flee Legion blades, and though heroes had attempted to hold the back Nekheb had kept them on the backfoot by making the occasional pass. Squeezed by the Praesi shield wall, drowning in crossbow fire and munitions, the Procerans had died in droves.

"The Champion was holding the line," Amadeus mused. "Ah, the pretty bait that was. If I'd gone to kill her, before the hour was done I would have died."

The third force had been the White Knight, riding through the broken mountains with every single horseman under Prince Kaus Papenheim charge the flank of the Legions at the darkest hour.

—

Grem heard them long before he saw them. His people knew that sound better than any other on Creation, the thunder of hooves. The doom of horde and clan, the mounted killers from the West. That these had sworn oaths

to the First Prince instead of the King of Callow made little difference. The odds of there being a usable pass after Wekesa and the Witch smashed apart the mountains were infinitesimal, he knew, but the Heavens had worked with lesser numbers. He'd been warned, that there would be a hidden knife near the end. His warlord's instincts had not dimmed with age. The Marshal of Praes glanced at the signal mage that had been his shadow all day.

"All mage lines for the Third," he said, "are to send fireballs and echoes in the pass, try to collapse it. And get Mok started on contingency Misfortune."

For any cavalry not led by a hero, this would have been an imbecile's suicide. The source of the charge was a narrow break in the mountainside atop a rocky hill at an almost ninety degree angle, all of it leading straight into a dark upright crevasse. With the White Knight at the tip of the charge, all these damning details would mean was mild inconvenience. Sorcery flared and the opening was drowned in flame and booming sounds, but no avalanche took. It had been worth making sure. Grem One-Eye watched grimly as the flank of Mok's legion pivoted to meet the coming enemy. Sappers ran ahead to sow the fields with caltrops as the two cohorts of trained pikemen formed in ranks. The ogre general's men were no Ironsides, but they were a heavy infantry legion nonetheless. Regulars dragged to the fore spikes of iron or wood and hammered them in a line three deep according to the standard pattern, angling them so they would be aimed at the belly of the horses.

As a welcoming gift, a pair of sappers with munitions-loaded crossbows shot clay balls at the narrow opening and green flames took to the rock. Thin was the hope that this would stop the enemy, but all eventualities should be covered if the cost was appropriate and two spheres was cheap enough. Mages, crossbowmen and sappers formed up behind the pikemen in good order, ranks of regulars serving as shield. Ranker's Fourth and the Twelfth had the front, so he could put his entire attention into this. The battle for the Vales would be won or lost here, and as Wekesa had so kindly deigned to drop a mountain down their only path of retreat there was no room left for mistakes. *You have to let them win*, Amadeus had said. *The Heavens need their due, before we steal it, else another path will be taken.* It might be his old friend was right, but Grem would not send men to die without doing his utmost to keep them alive.

The enemy appeared in a flash of blinding Light, evaporating the goblinfire-touched stone as the White Knight charged through. Behind him followed the mounted strength of Procer, pouring out like a stream of steel-clad death. He did not need to give orders in the matter of answer. Balls of flame bloomed across the ranks of the Third and hit the charging enemy, but Light burned and dispersed them like wisps of smoke. Crossbows fired in a perfect volley, and these drew some blood, but none touched the White Knight or the men behind him – as if the hand of some god steered away harm. The horsemen charged down the slope with unnatural grace, not a one stumbling over the harsh incline or jagged stones, and so the entered the killing field. The caltrops lasted a single heartbeat before the hero raised his blade high and a searing

flame swept before him, clearing a path. The sappers fired their opening salvo, sharpers and brightsticks. It was like throwing an egg at a wall. Explosions that should have shredded men and horses instead merely singed them, the light that should have seared eyes into blindness was laughed off.

Horns sounded, deep and promising ruing. The horsemen took three volleys, before reaching Mok's pikemen. Arrows and fire, the billowing poisonous clouds of smokers and the hard bark of sharpers killing less than *thirty*. This, Grem thought, was the face of the enemy. Of the Heavens putting their hand to the scale, making mockery of the strivings of men. For a single moment, as the pikemen clashed against the cavalry, it seemed like the legionaries would hold. It passed, pikes glancing off armour as the entire first rank of the cohorts were brutally trampled. In that first heartbeat, Grem One-Eye lost at least two hundred men. The relentless brutality of the carnage almost awed him. Horsemen continued to pour out of the passage and slowly the Third Legion began to bend. Like a man with a knife slid into the belly, groaning in pain. *Now, Black*, he thought. *Now, damn you*.

A roar older than even the coming of knights cowed the battlefield, and the orc grinned with all teeth bared. Orcs had never quite forgot that sound, even though the dragons that had once ruled the Steppes were long gone. Above, wreathed in the noonday sun, a madman was riding a dragon. And in the claws of that great beast was a massive chunk of stone, still dripping melted rock where it had been burned out. A silver arrow punched through the dragon's wing, and as it screamed another buried into its flank, but still the glorious bastards flew and down went the stone. Dropped in front of the very opening from which horsemen poured, sealing it shut.

"First Legion," Grem One-Eye roared. "Forward!"

Invicta was the cognomen bestowed upon his men by the Tower. Undefeated. They would not fail that name today.

—

"They managed to retreat anyway," Ranker said.

The heroes, even after it all, had held long enough for a retreat. Only two of the nine had perished, the White Knight joining his fellows to escape. The horseman he had brought were not so lucky. Amadeus shrugged.

"There was only so much victory to be had," he replied. "Papenheim came to us with sixty thousand men. He should now have slightly under forty."

The Legions had bled as well, she thought. Twenty-four thousand had garrisoned the Red Flower Vales, when the Iron Prince came calling. Sixteenth thousand now camped on the western side of the passage the battle had been fought over. Sacker's legion should still have the better part of it intact, but even so the losses had not been negligible. At least, she decided, five thousand in full. Against an army of mortals, the Vales could have been held against two hundred thousand until the end of time with the numbers they'd had. How starkly heroes turned the tide, even when checked by stratagem. Ranker shook her head, the two of them standing under a moonless night as exhausted le-

gionaries slumbered in the distance. Too tired to even make cooking fires for what few rations they had.

"Has Warlock made contact?" she asked.

The Black Knight shook his head.

"He might be dead, Amadeus," she said as gently as her people knew how.

The pale-skinned man shook his head again.

"I would know," Amadeus simply said.

She left it at that, the two of them standing in silence. Grem's tent, she saw even from so far away, was still lit. The orc did not know the meaning of rest, even in his old age.

"We have lost the Vales," Ranker finally said.

Black laughed.

"There are no more Vales to be had," he replied. "It will take months for the crusaders to dig through the collapse, even with sorcery. Not unless the Witch intervenes and if she does. . . "

"Warlock strikes," Ranker murmured.

If he was still alive, of which there was no proof.

"If Hasenbach could so easily employ the Stairway ritual," Black said, "she would not have stopped at a single passage through the Whitecaps. Multiple points of entry into Callow would have been a much greater strategic threat."

That was true enough. The Black Queen's army was strong and well-trained, but it also had limited numbers. She would have been forced to allow one of the invading armies free hand in Callow while she dealt with the other, which would have been disastrous on many levels.

"True as that might be, we're still on the wrong side of the pass," Ranker reminded him. "Our supply lines are cut, the full muster of Papenheim's reunited army is less than a day away and our only paths for retreat involve months of marching through enemy territory."

If they succeeded at giving the Iron Prince the slip, she thought, smashing the Proceran border army in the south and retreating through the lands of the League of Free Cities might be feasible. The alternative was heading for the Stairway, which was much less appealing even though the march would be much shorter. An army under Princess Rozala Malanza was retreating towards the pass, as of the last reports. The old goblin was not eager at the notion of forcing a narrow passage filled with hero-led Procerans.

"Are we?" the dark-haired man asked.

Ranker's large eyes blinked.

"You see us as stranded, old friend," Amadeus said. "I see us as *freed*. Callow is safeguarded for some time yet. No longer in need of our vigil."

The goblin licked her lips.

"And we're at the gate of the Principate's heartlands," she murmured.

"Come, Ranker," the Black Knight grinned. "Let's have a drink with Grem, and discuss our invasion of the Principate of Procer."

Chapter 23

Recoup

> "Take no comfort in that, hero. For though dawn ever comes, night ever does precede it."
>
> Dread Empress Regalia II

"Well, this is a fine fucking mess," I frowned.

The reports had been unfortunately delayed, mostly by the fact that the Red Flower Vales were apparently now the Red Flower Mountains. Only with brimstone instead of granite, because why would Warlock just make it a little bit worse when he could make thoroughly worse? If those things cracked open and devils started pouring out, I was going to be *cross*. That the current location of Masego's father was still unknown did not improve the situation in the slightest, since it meant I had no idea whether he was still guarding the region or not.

"The passes are closed," Hakram said. "Strategically, that is a victory. The only way into Callow is the northern passage, and it will be barred for at least six months."

I flicked a glance at the tall orc, still basking in the satisfaction of having him by my side again. It never seemed quite as bad, when Adjutant was with me. He'd arrived only a few days after the peace conference, and remained with us as the Army of Callow escorted the crusaders back up north. It'd been a month since the Battle of the Camps now, since I'd snatched a peace from the butchery and put ink to what might quite possibly be my own death warrant. I shook my head and reached for the small silver thimble at my side, knocking back the brandy in a single swallow.

"I don't mean that," I said. "I mean whatever the Hells *he*'s up to."

I touched the bottom of the thimble to the unfolded map occupying much of the desk we were sharing. The map itself was ours, but nothing else in this room was. This was the private solar of the Baroness of Harrow, who'd insisted we use it while we stayed in her keep. The liberation of her ancestral lands had apparently put me in her good books. That, or seeing me drop a lake on

an army had made her reconsider her stance on royal taxation even though the Pilgrim had knocked me the fuck out after barely ten heartbeats. The silver thimble was touching the edge of the Principality of Bayeux, where news now a fortnight old had Black and his legions sacking towns for supplies on their march west.

"Well, at a glance," Hakram drily said, "invading Procer."

"With fifteen thousand men?" I sceptically said. "We're not even sure he has siege with him. Even if he somehow starts taking cities without engines he can't *hold* them."

While on the surface the Tenth Crusade had tried to enter Callow and twice found the door shut on its fingers, the situation was a lot less promising than it appeared at first glance. The map held a handful of figurines standing for armies and their last reported locations, and the picture they painted was not pleasant. The three Proceran hosts we knew well: one down south in Tenerife guarding the border with the League, one marching out of northern Callow according to truce terms and the last, unfortunately, still camped in front of the Vales. Digging through the wreckage to reopen the pass. That alone would be bad, since the Jacks told me Papenheim should have between forty to fifty thousand soldiers under his command.

What was making it much, much worse was the Dominion of Levant was joining the fray. Half a year ago, Thief had passed me a report estimating they'd send an army about thirty thousand men. She'd been right, in a way. There *was* an army of that size marching to reinforce Papenheim. Unfortunately, there was also a second one by the shore of Lake Louvant – the massive lake in the centre of the Procer – currently preparing to embark on barges. Its destination was, allegedly, Salia. The seat of the First Prince, the capital of the Principate. And where Black would be headed if he continued to march in a straight line. At a guess, every single garrison in central Procer would be pulled together into a ramshackle army then swelled by the Levantines before they threw all of that at Black's fifteen thousand. The result seemed fairly obvious, veteran legions or not.

"It is an unusual gamble, by my understanding of the man," Adjutant conceded. "If those legions are lost, the Empire is crippled."

"That's a pretty way to put it," I grunted. "More honest is that without those men on the field, Praes is left so bare even *we* could feasibly invade it."

Odds weren't good for a reverse of the Conquest, I'd admit. I was pretty sure I could break Malicia's own legions on the field and seize most the countryside, but taking Praesi cities would be impossible without breaking my army. What I could do might still be enough for her reign to collapse, though, and that made it slightly tempting. Or would have, anyway, if there wasn't a decent chance that by the time Papenheim's army was done digging I'd be facing a host of eighty thousand men invading my kingdom. There was, to be blunt, no way the Army of Callow could beat them if they had heroes on their side, which

they most certainly would. Not after the losses we'd taken at the Battle of the Camps.

"It may be safe to assume, then, that he does not intend to lose those men," Hakram said.

"If he'd at least gotten Papenheim to chase him I'd sleep better at night, but the man *stayed*," I sighed. "I mean, Gods, I see the strategic sense in it. The damage Black can actually do is limited, and if Callow falls the crusade is half-won. It's still a damned cold call to make, though, basically writing off the heartlands of his own country."

"We do not have a monopoly on ruthlessness," the orc reminded me.

"It'd be a simpler war if we did," I said. "But we have to face the facts, I suppose. Let's be conservative and say it takes them four months to make a passage through the wreck. By that time, the Levantines will have reinforced them. They'll invade together."

The orc leaned over and filled my thimble for the second time this evening – he'd quietly claimed control of the bottle, perhaps for the best – before tending to his own.

"The Army of Callow will have largely recovered by then," he said. "And Duchess Kegan has reinforced us."

"The Deoraithe need to hold the northern passage, otherwise there's a decent chance our truce gets shredded and the princes turn back," I bluntly said. "It's one thing to trust them with a sword in hand, another if the passage is left empty. No, down south we'll be on our own."

Hakram raised his sliver thimble.

"Dust and misfortune," he said in Mthethwa.

I clinked mine against his.

"Doom pass you twice," I replied, finishing the old Soninke toast and tossing back the brandy.

The harsh burn – Gods, this was rough stuff even by my standards – went down my throat pleasurably. I set the silver down.

"We're not winning that battle," I admitted. "Not against those numbers."

"Then we seek an alternative," Adjutant serenely said.

Not a hint of doubt there to be found. It felt like spring water for my soul. I snorted, and got to my feet.

"Not tonight," I said. "It can wait until tomorrow. Get the others, I need to spend a few hours looking at something that's not a godsdamned report in Vivienne's chickenscratch."

"By your command, Your Majesty," Hakram drily replied.

He'd mouthed off, I noted, but took the bottle without my needing to tell him. Truly a prince among men, my Adjutant.

—

"You're mad," Archer said. "I knew you'd be mad. See, Zeze, it's just like I told you."

Hierophant frowned, smoothing his robes.

"You did not," he noted. "You said, to be exact: 'Trust me, Masego, she'll love it. This will have no consequences whatsoever.' "

I eyed the dark-skinned mage with chagrin.

"And you *believed* her?" I asked.

"Trust is the foundation of a healthy friendship," he told me. "I've acquired a book on the subject. Very informative."

Hakram smothered a laugh by faking a coughing fit. Naturally, I elbowed him in the stomach. Questioningly. Considering how often I did that to him, he'd learned to tell apart the nuances.

"It's actually a religious text from one of those love cults in southern Ashur," the orc whispered, leaning towards me. "You know, the Face of Love folks? The real payoff is when he'll get to those illustrated parts in the middle. Most lurid thing I've ever seen."

"If he starts talking about sex rituals, you'll be the one to clean up that mess," I hissed back in a low voice. "I'll use a royal decree if I have to."

"It's too far from Harrow to Baroness Ainsley's personal property," Vivienne considered out loud. "A household knight's, maybe?"

"Hey, for all we know they're already dead," Indrani offered. "So no harm done, right?"

What had once been a lovely garden with stone benches and tasteful statues continued to burn down. A firepit with an entire stag roasting on a spit – another crime right there, I mused, we didn't have hunting rights in the barony – had been dug in the heart of what'd previously been an elegant bed of flowers. I raised a finger, then put it down.

"All right, before I crack the whip I have to know," I said. "I get why the pit is on fire, although Masego using hellfame seems like both horrible overkill and a good way to spoil the meat. But why are the *trees* on fire?"

"Zeze and I had a philosophical argument," Indrani explained. "He's a terribly sore loser."

My gaze turned to Hierophant, who looked vaguely embarrassed.

"She dropped a branch on me," he admitted. "And she's quite good at avoiding fireballs."

My brow rose.

"That's seven trees, Masego," I patiently said.

"I am the *best* at dodging," Archer boasted without an ounce of shame in her body.

I closed my eyes and counted to five, then opened them.

"All right," I said. "First, after we're done here the two of you are going to rebuild this."

"That's fair," Indrani said.

She had the look in her eyes of a woman fully prepared to lounge with a drink in hand while Masego did all the work.

"By hand," I added. "Not a drop of magic involved."

"Vivi, how would you like to be Queen of Callow?" Archer said without missing a beat. "I have ever been a sworn enemy of tyranny in all its forms."

"Please," Thief drawled. "Who'd be fool enough to want to rule this mess?"

Thank you, Vivienne, I thought, *for your unflinching loyalty and support. Really warms the cockles of my heart in these trying times.*

"You can't be serious," Masego said, glaring at me. "*Manual labour*?"

He spoke those words, I mused, in much the same tone other people spoke about raising the dead or your average black-hearted betrayal.

"You have hands, Zeze," I said. "What do you think they're for?"

"Oh, *that* was a mistake," Hakram muttered.

Hierophant's back straightened.

"According to the writings of Seljan Banu-" he began.

"According to the writings of Catherine Foundling, you're doing it," I interrupted flatly. "And the material costs are coming out of both your pay, split equally."

"You don't even pay us!" Archer protested.

I blinked in surprise.

"Of course I do," I said. "All of you have been gathering general's pay since Second Liesse. Indrani, you have a vault in Laure. I handed you the key myself, remember?"

"Yeah, but it was empty," Archer said. "I thought you were just yanking my chain."

"Fadila assures me I've been paid punctually," Masego contributed hesitantly.

Indrani cast him a discrete look at the mention of his assistant.

"Mine was full, last I saw," Hakram agreed.

Slowly, I turned to Thief. Who looked the very picture of maidenly innocence. *I've seen you stab people, Dartwick*, I thought. *Pretty incompetently, but still. Try harder.*

"Vivienne," I said very mildly. "Have you been secretly robbing one of your beloved comrades for almost a year now?"

The dark-haired woman batted her eyes in lovely confusion.

"Masego's book said that earthly possessions only distract from the holy principle of eternal love," she said. "How could I let them burden such a dear friend?"

Archer let out a delighted cackle that would likely terrified any birds around into flight if the fire had not already done so. At first I was pleased they weren't brawling in a garden they'd already set on fire, but then I frowned.

"Wait, Indrani, how have you been paying for your tavern crawls all this time?" I asked.

"I *haven't*," she cheerfully replied.

"They send the bills directly to the palace," Hakram told me. "It's under 'sundry expenses' in the treasury books."

"I thought that was, like, bribes and stuff," I faintly said.

The orc hummed.

"Well, I mean, from a certain point of view. . . "

I snatched the bottle out of his hands, a tithe for his perfidious treachery.

"All right, you incompetent gaggle of vandals," I said. "Someone put out those trees. And get me a skewer of that stag, I want to find out how it tastes when you use hellfire to roast it."

As it turned out, genuinely awful. By that time, though, we were too drunk to mind.

—

I found myself glaring blearily at the moon.

I'd rested my eyes for some time but never actually fallen asleep. Most the others had, though. Masego was seated on the ground, lying against a toppled stone bench. He was snoring very daintily, which brought the shadow of a smile to my face. Indrani's feet were on his lap, occasionally kicking his legs as she moved in her sleep. She'd made a pillow out of her cloak, indifferent to the chill of the night. Vivienne was draped in actual sheets, which appeared to be *mine* and from the palace to boot by the cloth of gold bordering them and the embroidered heraldry. She was utterly still in her sleep, and unlike the others I could feel she was only a sudden movement away from waking. I'd not brought cloak of my own, since the one I usually wore did have the soul of a foe inconveniently attached to it. Besides, I hardly minded the cold these days. I'd remained close to Hakram, but instead of a comfort the warmth that emanated from him had me feeling restless.

"Awake?" Adjutant said, moving slightly aside.

Ugh, he'd been a comfortable mattress even if he was way too warm. How dare he.

"Wasn't quite asleep," I said. "Just not thinking. Closest I get to slumber, some nights."

"You should try anyway," he said. "You're always better, afterwards. More human."

"Since when do you think so well of humans?" I snorted.

"They've grown on me over the years," he gravelled.

"The opposite, for me," I admitted, more honestly than I'd meant to.

"Not them you were glaring at," Hakram pointed out.

I hummed.

"I still feel like destroying the moon, whenever I look at it too long," I said. "I know it's irrational, but it's like having as stone in my boot. The boot in this terrible metaphor being my soul, probably? Let's be honest, it's not the worse thing that tattered old mess has been compared to."

"Who knows?" he said. "It might be for the best if you do. There's an old Praesi story about Dread Emperor Sorcerous having bound his soul to it, that he's still scheming his final escape from death."

"There's a distressing amount of Tyrants with stories like that," I noted. "We're going to have to get around to cleaning up all those loose ends some day."

"Probably just a story," Hakram shrugged. "He was one of the better ones, anyway. Made a place for the shamans at his court, treated them with respect."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Didn't he also try the sentient tiger army?"

"The Tower's tried worse over the centuries," he mused. "If he'd gotten the tigers to pay taxes afterwards, it might even have counted as a gain."

That surprised a laugh out of me.

"Imagine having all that power," I said. "And using it for a godsdamned *tiger army*. The more Praesi histories I read the less I understand the Empire."

"Funny thing, power," Adjutant gravelled. "Never quite as straightforward as you'd think."

"Preaching to the choir there," I said. "Used to think that if I could blow up a fortress with a snap of my fingers it would all be so much simpler. Now I can, and so very few of my problems can be solved by that."

The orc shuffled against the bench.

"The Clans have few written histories," he said. "Oral tradition is how we pass it all down."

"Miezans did a number on your people, yeah," I said. "I remember. They had that nasty habit when conquering places."

"There was a great repository of scrolls in the lands of the Broken Antlers Horde, or so I was taught as a child," Hakram murmured. "They put it to the torch. I suppose they had reason to, from where they stood."

"The reasons of conquerors tend to be acceptable only to them," I said.

In this, I spoke as Callowan.

"Not that," Hakram said. "The scrolls, most of them were parchment. Human skin."

I blinked in surprise.

"Your ancestors were certainly a charming bunch," I said.

"They were what they were," Adjutant said. "The tragedy, I think, is that we only remember the worst of them. The excesses. We were more, in the dawn of days. And when they ripped out the heart of us they made it so that we could never be that again."

"It's getting better, though, isn't it?" I said. "I remember when I first joined the College. Seeing orcs read and write and talk, like. . . "

I hesitated.

"Like we were a people whole, and not the hissing shade of our heyday," Hakram finished gently. "There is something taking shape, Catherine, that is true enough. But it is not what we once were. No more than Callow under your rule is the Callow of the old Alban kings."

"That's an old refrain, Hakram," I said. "The same the Trueblood sang, and the rebels in Liesse. We only remember the golden parts of the good old days.

They had their failings too. You can't look at our own failures and match them to barely remembered victories. The comparison is false."

"Oh, we were a terrible enough people in those days," the orc murmured. "Glorious too, at times, but terrible always. But I was speaking of old stories. There is one I remember, that the old raiders past their prime would tell us when the snows kept us in our tents. It is a conversation, between the Warlord Gazog and her son. One of many, though few are remembered. We call it the Riddle of Power, learned from an ancient stele."

I closed my eyes, leaning back against the stone.

"Tell me," I said.

He remained silent for a moment, gathering his memories, and when he spoke it was in Kharsum cadenced.

"After her spear had broken and she had grown fat and grey from the tributes of mankind's kings, Old Gazog took her young son to the great gathering of the thaw, where many clans assembled to trade and prepare the making of war," he said. "With cups of blood-brew they sat beneath their banner in silence until the sun had passed. Under the dark sky, Old Gazog spoke this: my son, you have witnessed the multitude of our people before you. Young and old, warrior and chieftain, lorekeeper and bronzesmith. I ask you now, where lies power among them?"

Hakram's voice lightened, as if he were a young boy of his kind.

"Honoured Mother, her son said. This is no riddle, for the answers has always been thus: it lies with chieftain and warlord, for their power is command over all. Old Gazog laughed, her teeth grown soft from many victories. Foolish son, she said. If their power comes from command, then how can their command come from power? How mighty is a chieftain, without obedience given?"

Adjutant clicked his fangs, and his were not soft at all.

"Old Gazog's son pondered this, and saw her wisdom. In this he was enlightened, and so answered once more. Honoured Mother, he said, power then lies with the lorekeepers. For they hold much wisdom and learning, cunning and law, and in teaching it does their power manifest. Foolish son, she said. What is wisdom, without hand to carry it? Was it a word, without ear to hear it? But wind, and wind is no mother of glory."

The orc's voice grew rough.

"Honoured Mother you speak true, her son said," Hakram said. "The birth of empire is bronze, and so power lies with the bronzesmiths for they alone know the secrets of fire and forge. They hold in their palm the source of war, and only in war can glory be found. Foolish son, said Old Gazog. You learn nothing. The whelping of fire is as wisdom, worthless without hand to wield it. Would a hoard of a thousand axe-blades bear the name of empire?"

He paused and I heard him lick his lips.

"Old Gazog's son grew wroth, for he did not know of his foolishness. Hateful Mother, he said. You speak many words, yet deny all save the hand. Is this your wisdom, that an empire is naught but swing of blade? All the peoples of

the world know this, and there can be no further learning of it. Foolish son, she said. Be silent if you cannot be wise. There is terrible truth beneath the riddle of power, and it I will reveal it to you now."

Hakram went silent. I did not open my eyes.

"And?" I asked. "What did she say?"

The orc laughed harshly.

"No one knows," he told me. "You see, the Miezans broke the stele."

I heard him look up at the sky.

"Sometimes," Hakram Deadhand said softly, "I think that a truer answer than what was written."

Chapter 24

Invitation (Redux)

> "The enemy of my enemy is second on the list."
>
> Dread Empress Vindictive III

"Is it contained?"

I didn't bother with greetings, knowing the manners would be lost on Masego anyway. The dark-skinned mage nodded, not even noticing the abruptness of my tone.

"It did not struggle against imprisonment," Hierophant said. "Nor has is sought to escape binding since."

The two of us walked towards the sparse woods where the creature had been trapped inside wards without wasting time. Night had just fallen, which was a small mercy. It meant there'd be fewer witnesses. Already the scout line who'd found it approaching Harrow had been sworn to secrecy, but there was no telling if anyone else had come across it. as the exact path it'd taken to get here was still a mystery. More worryingly, the Observatory *hadn't seen it* and it was meant to pick up on exactly this kind of stuff. I was not great student of sorcery, but even to me the implications were visible. Whoever had sent the thing was a mage of very great skill, and there were only a few of those around. And even fewer among those who'd lower themselves to raising the dead, much less this... particular kind.

"You're sure it wasn't an attack?" I asked for the third time.

Masego's brow creased.

"Certainty of unknown intent is, by definition, impossible," he said peevishly. "My current *theory*, based on initial observation, is that this was not an attack. It is not armed, and was not crafted with combat in mind – or at least no form of combat I can recognize."

"It doesn't need to swing blades to be dangerous, Masego," I said. "It just needs to carry a magic plague and take a dip in the water reservoirs."

"Don't be obtuse, Catherine," he sighed. "Plague-bearing was one of the first threats I assessed it for. There is no trace. It has, if anything, been stripped

out of everything but the barest necessities for functionality. It does carry an enchanted object, but that object has no harmful properties."

I frowned.

"Is that how it slipped the Observatory's sight?" I asked.

"I do not believe so," Hierophant said. "I've made preliminary studies, and found that its presence in Creation seems *dimmed*, somehow. Like a shadow under sorcerous sight. It was not invisible to the Observatory so much as exceedingly difficult to find if not specifically looked for."

"We need to fix that weakness," I flatly said. "If this could be done once, it can be done again. We're relying on the Observatory to keep one step ahead of threats, and I'm not pleased someone already found a way to fool it. You told me it'd be years before someone found a counter."

"I told you it would be three to five years before the Empire found a counter, barring my father's sustained intervention," the blind man corrected. "This is not Imperial work."

We were going to have a longer conversation about this down the line, but I allowed silence to take hold as we finally got deep enough in the woods that the creature was in sight. Surrounded by layers on layers of translucent force with glowing runes inscribed, the undead creature was utterly still. Hakram, in full armour with his axe in hand, was keeping an eye on it. Indrani was out in the field to make sure there wasn't another wandering the countryside, and Vivienne combing the keep for infiltration we might have missed. It wasn't a person I was looking at, though it might once have been. The upper body and face was of a pale-skinned man's, but that was where the normality ended. There was a pair of segment, almost insect-like arms coming out of the creature's back, with hooks at the tip. *Made for climbing,* I thought. Had it crossed the Whitecaps without taking a pass? The body parts beneath the torso were harder to make out. The entire creature had been covered in a ragged cloak when the goblins first saw it, though it had fallen off the upper body since, and what I could glimpse through the cloth was eight spider-like legs of bone and necrotized flesh folded close to the torso. It was, I grimaced, the kind of abomination you'd expect to be dumped out in the Wasteland after an Emperor climbed the Tower and cleared out the basement of their predecessor's experiments. There were no visible weapons save for the claws, not that it needed any.

"You're sure this isn't of your father's making?" I said.

"I could perhaps reproduce the design in two months, he in one," Masego noted. "The material parts of it anyway. What makes it truly fascinating work is the guiding intelligence, since there is barely any. Every ounce of metaphorical fat has been trimmed. It is, I will admit, one of the most magnificently efficient necromantic constructs I have ever seen."

I cursed.

"All right, so either a high-tier necromancer has just come out of the woodworks," I said. "Or we're dealing with something much, much worse."

The Dead King. Fucking Hells. It wasn't like the situation had been going so well the Heavens needed to drop another dead cat in my lap. Assuming this was their work, anyway, and not a play by the Pricks Below.

"Catherine," Hakram said suddenly, breaking me out of my thoughts before a proper rant could take hold. "It's moving."

My eyes flicked at the creature, which had risen on two bone appendages and was peering at me from the edge of the wards.

"Well," I muttered. "That's pretty lively for a dead cat."

Masego glanced at me and opened his mouth but I silenced him with a raised hand. I felt him twitch, the mutter something under his breath about there being no feline components. The undead stared at me for a solid twenty heartbeats before opening its mouth.

"I offer greetings to the Black Queen of Callow," the creature said. "Your renown has been heard far and wide, bringing the attention that is your due. I bear invitation from the King of the Dead, who offers safe passage to Keter. In the face of Above's wroth, the champions of Below must either face demise alone or overturn the wheel of fate in coming striving."

I waited just in case it had anything to add and in a manner of speaking it did. The jaws unhinged and a serpent-like black tongue came out, offering up what looked like a circular seal of pure obsidian.

"The enchanted object it was carrying," Masego said. "It holds... instructions. A sliver of knowledge accessible through touch."

I stared at the obsidian seal and decided it was too early in the year to start making decisions that blatantly terrible. I wasn't getting anywhere near that until Masego had spent a few days checking it out, and even then I wasn't touching it if it could be at all avoided.

"I hear the King of the Dead's invitation," I said. "But seek clarification on the nature of it."

The tongue snapped back in. The undead began speaking again, but it was just repeating the exact same message. Masego's glass eyes were staring at it, his head cocked to the side.

"Hierophant?" I probed.

"The trigger for the actions was your presence," he said. "The message is not spoken consciously so much as woven into what passes for the construct's mind. It cannot reason or reply, only repeat."

"My presence," I repeated slowly.

"Winter, more specifically," he said. "I'll need a closer look to find out the decision threshold, but I suspect Larat would not have been able to fool it into speaking."

Hakram had come to stand at my side while we spoke, warily eyeing the undead.

"Cat," he gravelled. "If the Dead King knew enough to bespell for that..."

"He has a much better idea of what's going on outside his kingdom than we thought," I finished grimly. "Shit."

Masego cleared his throat.

"Why are we displeased?" he said. "My interest in diplomacy is inexistent, but this seems to me like an offer of alliance. Are we not under siege by the crusaders?"

"We are," I said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"But there's a saying back home about Praesi bearing gifts, and I think it might just apply here," I said.

Hakram loomed tall at my side, baring his fangs at the creature.

"I'll get the others," he said. "The solar?"

I nodded and stood silently as he left, watching the creature as it began to speak the message again.

"You have an hour to study it," I finally told Masego. "Don't break it, we don't know if there'd be consequences. After the hour's done, I want you in the solar with everyone else."

An eager smile split Hierophant's face in two.

"Thank you, Catherine," he murmured. "This will be *most interesting*."

I walked away without a word, pretty sure I didn't want to see what would follow.

—

There were six of us in Baroness Ainsley's solar, enough that it felt full without being outright cramped. The piles of parchment that followed Adjutant like a curse had been dumped unceremoniously on the ground so that the only thing on the table was a detailed map of Calernia – along with a handful of goblets. Mine was still half-filled with aragh, but I'd refrained from downing it whole after Hakram sent me a quelling look. *Fine, be that way*, I thought mulishly. *It's not like I was just essentially offered an alliance by the oldest and most dangerous abomination in Calernian history. If there was ever a godsdamned reason to drink...* Masego was already looking bored and we hadn't even begun. He'd hinted his time could be better spent studying the envoy the very moment he'd walked into the solar, and had been sulking ever since I'd told him it would have to wait. It would have been kind of cute, if he wasn't essentially pouting because I'd told him he couldn't go elbows-deep in dead flesh. Archer was keeping him attentive – and twitching – by idly tearing up the pages of a book I was pretty sure she'd gotten for this very purpose. Vivienne and Juniper had pointedly sat as far as each other from possible, to my irritation. I was not unaware they were less than fond of each other, but until now they'd been a lot subtler about it. Something must have happened while I was taking my lovely Winter nap, but neither of them was talking. Hakram was, as usual, an oasis of calm competence in the middle of the mess that was our lives. He'd transcribed the Dead King's message from memory and provided it for the others to read. I cleared my throat.

"All right," I said. "Let's get this started. Before we get to unpacking anything else, Thief can provide a reminder of how fucked we're looking at the moment."

Vivienne shot me an amused look before leaning over the table.

"As most of you are aware," she said, "there is a knife at Callow's throat."

She tapped the map right at the feet of the sculpted spearman figurine on the western side of the former Red Flower Vales.

"Prince Klaus Papenheim, the First Prince's foremost general, is digging his way though the wrecked passes as we speak," Thief said. "He has between forty and fifty thousand men under his command, and we estimate that within four months he will be reinforced by an army of thirty thousand Levantines."

"With the way Cat's looking like she's sucking on a lemon that personally murdered her father, I'm guessing he's preparing an invasion," Indrani commented.

She sounded at best mildly interested, but I'd take what I could get.

"By the time the Levantines arrive, we believe they'll have dug out a usable passage," Thief said. "Which is to say, in about four months we'lle be facing an offensive of at least seventy thousand soldiers led by several heroic bands."

"That's bad," Archer mused. "Zeze, doesn't that sound bad?"

"I suppose," Hierophant shrugged. "Can't we make a truce with those as well?"

"I'm not opposed to the notion," I admitted. "But we don't have the men to force another draw, and we're not dealing with Amadis Milenan here. Papenheim is the First Prince's uncle and the most decorated general in Procer, he's not going to flinch if we bloody him a bit. He'll stick it out until only one of us is left standing, and the odds aren't looking great for that being us."

"A truce in the Vales might lead to the political collapse of the Tenth Crusade," Hakram said. "And likely the end of his niece's reign with it. Negotiation is not a plausible option as things stand."

"I could kill the First Prince," Indrani suggested.

"The Tower's been trying to do that for over twenty years," I told her. "She has a future-telling Named, the Augur, watching for attempts. If Black is to be believed the Augur protects Papenheim as well, so removing him isn't on the table either."

"Ugh, seers," Archer complained. "They take all the fun out of it."

Juniper growled, cutting through the whining.

"Tactics won't get us out of this," she said. "We need strategic leverage. Either reinforcements that make holding the Vales feasible, or someone to put pressure on the Principate so it can't afford to leave those seventy thousand men at the border."

The orc marshal drummed her thick fingers against the map.

"The Army of Callow will be, barely, in fighting fit if our timeline for the invasion holds," she said. "But another major battle will take us right back out of the war, won or lost, and this time for much longer. We're bleeding veterans

and irreplaceables. To be blunt, if we want fight again then we need a force to split casualties with. Much better would be not fighting at all."

"So, now we take a hard look at our options," I said. "The name of the game tonight being: is there *literally any other option* that the Dead King?"

"I could go to Refuge," Archer offered. "Most pupils will be gone, especially the heroes – last I heard Silver signed up with the White Knight – but there's bound to be one or two left I can beat into joining. Lady Ranger probably won't care enough to get involved."

I worried my lip with my teeth.

"Even by gate, it'd take most entire preparation time to get there and back," I finally said. "I wouldn't sneer at more Named, but I doubt they'll be enough to turn the tide unless some real powerhouses have been keeping quiet."

"They probably wouldn't be frontline material," Indrani admitted. "Beastmaster might qualify with the right mount, but he's not a pushover I can bully and he doesn't really give a shit about anything going on outside the Waning Woods. Also tends to disappear for months at a time, so he might not be there at all. Concocter's the only one I can be sure will be there, but her thing is potions and she uses ingredients from the woods for most her brews."

"We'll table that for now, then," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Mercenaries," Juniper said. "Diabolist hired men through Mercantis twice. I know the treasury's tight but better some debt than the kingdom lost."

"That well's run dry," Vivienne said, shaking her head. "All the larger companies are already under contract in the League, and even if we snap up all the smaller ones that'd be at most two or three thousand soldiers. Extremely unreliable ones. All the reputable mercenaries are already in someone's pay."

"Speaking of the League," I said, raising an eyebrow at Thief.

"The Hierarch's still not willing to sit at the table," Vivienne replied. "The only saving grace is that Procer is also apparently full of wicked foreign oligarchs so they're equally out of luck there. The Tyrant of Helike is willing in theory, but he also says he loves Hierarch 'like the father he had and then murdered' so he won't cut a deal behind his leader's back. Not sure we should even if he agrees, to be honest. Aside from how astonishingly prone to backstabbing the man is, poaching a member of the League might get the rest of it coming after us in retaliation."

Masego cleared his throat, and I glanced at him in surprise. I'd not actually expected him to contribute to this part of the council.

"Is there a reason we cannot simply contact Uncle Amadeus?" he asked. "He has legions with him, as I understand it, and we could spirit them away through gates."

I felt Juniper's eyes on me. She agreed with the notion, I knew. She'd already made that very clear in private.

"I'm not willing to do that until I know what game he's playing, and he hasn't been forthcoming," I said. "For all I know the moment we come to pick

him up we'll be heading into a pitched battle with half of Procer. I won't consider him an enemy right now – Hells, he pretty much scrapped a legion's worth of men to defend my borders – but it's a long walk from that to trusting him."

Masego's glass eyes turned to gaze at me, the power of Summer within burning.

"We will come to his aid if he is cornered," Hierophant said, and it wasn't a question. "I do not ask you to fight a battle for his sake, but he at least should be rescued."

I clenched my fingers under the table.

"If he's in danger of death," I said. "I didn't force him to take his army in the heartlands of Procer, Masego. And I doubt he would have done it without a plan, which we know nothing about."

There was a tense moment, then the Soninke nodded.

"He rarely does anything without one," Hierophant conceded.

Indrani tore another page from the book on her lap and he twitched in irritation. Smiling broadly, Archer looked at me.

"The Empress' supposed to be in charge, right?" she said. "Seems like we could drop this whole mess into her lap."

"We can't," Vivienne and I simultaneously said.

I snorted, then gesture for her to continue.

"It would break the terms of our truce with the northern crusaders to do so," Thief said. "Praes is already under siege by the Thalassocracy, regardless. It has no legions to spare."

"Deoraithe aren't our solution either, before anyone mentions them," I added. "Kegan's army will be holding the passage. Even if we had another way to keep that closed, she's been pretty blunt in telling me she's not taking her army into a meat grinder down in the Vales. She's willing to help, but there's limits."

There was a long moment of silence around the table, the stares of most going to the map and the last few forces unaccounted for.

"The Chain of Hunger," Juniper said, enumerating them. "The Kingdom of the Dead. The Everdark."

Well, at least they were taking this seriously enough no one had brought the elves. Not that there were even in Creation at the moment. There were still tucked away in some inaccessible corner of Arcadia according to the few Imperial reports Malicia still sent our way.

"The Grey Pilgrim is highly influential in Levant," Vivienne said. "There might be an angle there as well."

"Pilgrim's running his own game," I quietly replied. "Nothing we have to offer is better than the irons he already has in the fire."

She fixed me with a long searching look before nodding. We were, I suspected, going to have a conversation about that.

"The ratlings do not seem like a promising avenue," Hakram said. "Imperial chronicles imply they have no understanding of diplomacy."

He'd been rather quiet so far, but then he tended to be in councils like these. He'd always preferred to let others do the talking, to work behind the stage so things got done after decisions had emerged.

"It has been theorized only the youngest among them and a very small number of the truly old," Masego noted. "It is, at least, a matter of record that even after Triumphant slaughtered over nine tenths of their population they offered no surrender. She withdrew after burning everything down and salting the ashes, as I recall."

Only Hakram and Juniper pressed their knuckle to their forehead at the mention of the name, I noticed, though they both managed not to speak the words.

"Shame," Indrani said. "The Lady says their Ancient Ones are just large brutes, but the Horned Lords are supposed to be hard fuckers. We could use a few of those."

"If we assault Lycaonese territories and lay waste to border defences, it might be possible to bait an attack from the Chain even without prior negotiation," Vivienne said. "They send warbands south every spring, there should already be many on the march."

"At least half the armies of Rhenia and Hannoven are still up there manning the walls," Juniper said. "It won't be a milk run, I can promise you that. Lycaonese die hard. Losses are guaranteed, and I'm not hearing any certainty they'll have to deal with worse than a few warbands after."

"We need as stronger foundation going forward," Hakram calmly agreed. "That plan would rely on too many unknowns."

"The drow?" Vivienne said, sounding less than enthusiastic.

"We don't know a lot about them," I said. "Archer?"

"Lady Ranger tried to hunt the Priestess of Night, a century back I think? They messed with the tunnels so she couldn't find a way to their cities," Indrani shrugged. "Haven't got much else on them."

"We know they have no unified central rule," Adjutant said. "That would make them difficult to treat with, much less mobilize. And there are records sixty years old that speak of a drow raiding party wielding weapons of iron instead of steel."

"I don't care if they're using bones," I grunted. "As long as there's enough of them to worry Hasenbach."

"Even assuming they can be assembled and gated within a sennight of your arrival, the Vales would be too far to return in time," Juniper said. "That means an offensive in Procer, then, and we'd need of a functional army for that to have any degree of success. Nothing we've heard leads me to believe they have one."

"Might be one of the few places susceptible to the Foundling charm though," Archer said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"The Foundling charm?" I warily asked.

The ochre-skinned woman grinned.

"You know, killing the people in charge until someone willing to listen gets promoted," she said. "The Tenets of Night are all about stabbing to get on top, you'd blend right in."

It was an effort not to sigh.

"Might take a lot of killing to get anywhere, though," Archer mused. "Better to take me to Refuge instead."

I grimaced and passed a hand through my tangled hair.

"Well," I said. "I suppose we're going to have to talk about the Dead King, then."

Bonus Chapter: Court III

> "Power is a blanket that never covers quite as much as you need it to."
>
> Queen Matilda the Elder of Callow

Vivienne had learned to enjoy prowling the nights of Laure, though Callow's capital city would never be as dear to her as Southpool. Back home, in the serpentine alleys of fat brick houses where she'd first learned her trade, she could orient herself without a thought. It had come naturally, an instinct birthed out of thrill and theft. Navigating Laure's cluster of disparate districts, in comparison, had been an acquired taste. Much like ale, and as the drink she'd once thought little more than bitter brew it had artlessly become a part of her life she no longer bothered to question. She liked the Lakeside District most of all, even though years of stifling rule under Governor Mazus were only now beginning to be recovered from. The docks there different from the quiet piers of Southpool that became barred every night: here activity thrummed even after dark. The taverns were part of it, for every drink peddler unable or unwilling to afford guild membership had opened some grimy temple there for sailors and the destitute to frequent. But it was more than that: Laure never truly slept, least of all here. The royal palace might be the heart of the city, but as far as Vivienne was concerned it was Lakeside that held the soul.

Even in the dark barges came to rest against the long rickety docks of the Regalian, officially a customs house said to be built from what part of the remains of a Praesi flying fortress had not been claimed by House Alban. Less officially, it was the spring well of everything in Laure that shied away from the eyes of the law. The place was beautiful, in its own way. Youths from Denier or Southpool coming to trying their luck in the capital disembarked with nothing but the clothes on their backs, smugglers paid their dues to the Guild of Smugglers to avoid having their cargo inspected – unaware that a cut of the coin ended up in Ratface's treasury regardless – and even fishermen out late to try part of the lake without competition from the guild of their trade and its ancient rights. It was alive in a way that the cleaner parts of the district weren't. The Colonnade and its worn statues of the seven first Alban rulers had been kept clean and quiet by men with cudgels since the aftermath of the Conquest,

when the stone anchorage had been the closed demesne of the Praesi and their favourite Callowan cronies.

The Whitestone District reminded her of that stilted place, Vivienne decided as she moved from rooftop to rooftop in silence. Oh, it was easy on the eyes. Wide sprawling avenues holding noble manors and beautiful guildhalls. Gardens every few intersections, paid for by the contributions of those that owned property in the district. The locals did enjoy being separate from the rest of Laure. They'd had their own watch as well, once upon a time, though Catherine had disbanded it after her coronation with a look in her eyes that was all savage glee. Sometimes Vivienne forgot the Queen of Callow had been a nobody orphan but a few years ago, and one used to being stepped on by foreign and homebred lords alike. She had not forgotten a single slight from those days, the Black Queen. As was their people's way. Thief slid down a tiled roof onto a warding wall, then leapt across onto a rain gutter and rode it down to someone's darkened garden.

She did not *need* to travel this way, not truly. A single flash of the queen's seal and there was not a gate in the city that would be barred to her, nor a watchman that would dare disobey her orders. But there was a part of Vivienne that would never be comfortable with the power that came from her status. The Woe, she knew, were highborn in a way that highborn themselves could only dream of being. Close companions to the queen, and Named. No land or riches came from holding one of those, but they brought authority in a way that neither could. It was a gilded cage. Though, praise where it was due, none of the Woe had been taken in by it. Hierophant rarely left the still half-built Observatory if he had to, Archer spent more time Lakeside than in the palace and Adjutant spent his hours putting out fires across the kingdom. As for Catherine, well, she had no love for the crown. The frank admission by the Queen of Callow that she'd abdicate in a heartbeat if it didn't carry the risk of collapsing the country had been a great reassurance to Vivienne. Second Liesse had... changed Catherine in many ways. Made her more cautious, more prone to avoiding confrontation. The weight of a hundred thousand souls lost was still bearing down on her shoulders.

Caution, though, did not mean lethargy. They had been watching. Waiting. Measuring. And now that Lady Valerie Hadley had tipped her hand, Thief had been freed to act. The Valewoman's mansion was not truly her own, Vivienne had learned. The Hadleys had not been wealthy enough to rank a house in the single most expensive district in the Kingdom of Callow, and even within the Marquisate of Vale had not been considered among the influential houses. Landed knights, kept afloat by the rent of their few fields to farmers. Some connections to the – once-disbanded by the Black Knight but now reinstated by his very pupil – Guild of Smiths had been rumoured, but nothing definite. Lady Hadley had been gifted the low wall Vivienne was currently climbing and the house beyond it by Baron Richard of Holden, two years before the Liesse Rebellion and the subsequent crucifixion of the man when it failed. *For services*

rendered, the deed had said. The Eyes of the Empire had two scrolls on the matter, and she'd been in their sights as a possible rebel element ever since – even though she'd spent the Liesse Rebellion in Laure, never taking arms with the rebels.

Vivienne had wondered, ever since the name came across her desk, whether she was an agent for a foreign power. It would have been an explanation for the quantity of coin she'd begun moving around last month. Yet there was no evidence of collusion with the Principate or the Tower. It had been venturing down the rabbit hole Brandon Talbot had emerged from that shed some light on the mystery. Valerie Hadley had discretely hidden a handful of the knights that came out of the woodworks to found the Broken Bells for half a decade, at her own expense. That the Baron of Holden had seen fit to reward her for it had interesting implications – he must have been part of the conspiracy that kept Callowan chivalry alive under the occupation – though given the death of the man and the end of his line's rule they were now largely irrelevant. It'd been telling, though. Hadley had kept knights hidden and funded at a time where such a thing would have landed her on a table with Praesi mages dissecting her memories before summary execution if she were caught. She was either patriotic or hard to frighten. Perhaps both, Vivienne had eventually decided. It would explain how this night had come to be.

Midnight Bell had already passed, but there were still lamps lit in the gallery that overlooked the small pond and garden below. Thief was amused by her glimpse of the tall open windows that made up most of the wall. She was fairly certain Governor Mazus has once taxed properties according to the height and length of windows, and given the multitude of those in the mansion perhaps there was an explanation to be found about why Baron Richard had been so willing to cede the deed of his beautiful mansion to a stranger. Thief crept across the grass silently and melded into the shadows at the base of the wall as a household guard passed through the garden. She could have used her aspect to avoid the need entirely, but relying on the arcane was a good way to get sloppy. *And sloppy thieves die young, here and everywhere.* The climb was easy. Decorative bas-reliefs made for easy footholds and there were plenty vines and shadows to hide in when the next guard passed. Thief's silhouette stood wreathed in moonlight for a heartbeat when she crouched on the windowsill, but when a breeze set the curtains to moving and Hadley glanced to the side she was already gone.

Lady Valerie, she saw, was alone at the high table with ledgers and household papers. A mostly full carafe of wine sat to the side, alongside a cup. That simplified matters a great deal. **Hide**, Vivienne thought. Steps barely even a whisper, she stood behind the woman and fished out a little parchment satchel. The pale powder within sunk into the cup of wine without a sound, leaving no trace. Praesi had a way with alchemies of all kinds, it had to be said. Thief poured double the dose, as Hadley did not strike her like a heavy drinker. It was only after the Valewoman drank from the cup that Vivienne pulled out the

seat to her left, allowing her aspect to ebb. Valerie Hadley cursed and reached for the knife at her hip, fumbling with the sheath, and Thief dropped into the sinfully comfortable chair with a sigh of pleasure.

"Good evening, Lady Valerie," she said.

The words stilled the woman, though her eyes were still touched by fear.

"Lady Thief," she replied, voice thick with that slow Valean drawl. "The queen's own Left Hand. I suppose I should feel flattered."

Vivienne smiled. She was, at least, not one of that particularly despicable breed of plotters that flinched and mewled when their schemes were brought to light.

"Feel free, if that is your preference," she shrugged. "We were overdue a conversation, don't you think?"

"And they said the queen would be no tyrant," Hadley said darkly. "That she might have been taught by a monster, but that in the end blood would win out. So much for *that*. Am I to disappear into a dark cell now, Vivienne Dartwick?"

"No. No, there will be none of that," Thief softly said. "I am here because I wanted to hear you speak. Look you in the eyes myself. It is a weakness, I suppose, but to be Named is to have your flaws swell along the rest of you."

"I have done nothing wrong," Lady Hadley said. "You know this as well as I."

"If you'd taken Proceran coin, I would hold you in contempt," Vivienne admitted. "I would outright despise you, if it had been the Tower's instead. But your little conspiracy was Callowan, from beginning to end, wasn't it? A handful of lords and ladies gave you coin, but most came from common folk. No conspirators they, only men and women afraid of what this land has become."

"A kingdom is more than crown and court," the woman replied. "How many despise the Black Queen's rule, I wonder? Mere hundreds were enough to pay the price and some, but I suspect could have found thousand more."

"It's not Catherine you bought the death of," Thief said. "It was Hakram. Clever of you, given how deeply he is needed. Even cleverer to avoid the Guild of Assassins and reach out for Praesi killers. The Jacks are near blind in the Wasteland."

"You found out anyway," Hadley smiled bitterly.

"The coin is what caught our attention, but that was inevitable," Vivienne noted. "It would not have been enough to warrant action, as you no doubt believed. Hanging you on such thin grounds would have tarred Catherine's reputation. But your hired killers paid the Guild of Smugglers to cross the border, the fools, and that allowed us to unravel the whole thread."

"I did not choose him for being an orc," Lady Valerie said. "Let that be known. It is a disgrace for one of his kind to hold high office in Callow, but hardly warrants murder. No, I soiled my hands because without him the Black Queen would finally need to rely on *us*. Her own people. How foul a truth, that it would take so large an absence before she even pondered that."

"I've thought the same, on occasion," Vivienne admitted. "The Kingdom of Callow is born anew, and yet the highest offices are nearly all held by foreigners. Loyal to Catherine first and foremost, without any genuine love for the land they rule in her name."

"Then you understand why this is necessary," the woman said, leaning forward. "This is a farce, Thief. Kendall stacks the court and the officers with merchants and eldermen that will never gainsay her, cowed by her high birth and favour with the queen. The very Queen's Council has a *single Callowan* sitting on it and half the south will be parcelled away to legionaries? It is madness. It cannot go on. Better we suffer retaliation for the Deadhand's death than do nothing. Sacrifices had to be made."

"It won't happen," Vivienne said quietly.

"The Adjutant's death?" Hadley chuckled without humour. "Obviously."

"No," Thief replied. "Liesse being partitioned. It was never going to happen, you see. I leaked a false document to someone I knew the Regals had cultivated."

Blood drained from the other woman's face.

"I would have done without even that," Vivienne noted. "I wanted to falsify the entire accusation and finish it all months ago, but I suppose Catherine needed to be *sure*. That they really would go that far in their disregard."

"This is murder," Lady Valerie said coldly. "Cold-blooded, calculated murder."

"Is it?" Thief mused. "It relied on the actors involved being willing to cross the line on their own. At no point was coercion involved. That was, to my understanding, the entire point of it. As for you, Hadley, you tried to wield a knife. The moment the hand touches the handle, one must we willing to suffer the consequences."

"How eager you are to excuse tyranny," the other woman snarled. "You are the willing servant of this kingdom's woe. I hope you drown with the rest of us, when all accounts are finally settled."

"The funny thing is that I'm trying to achieve exactly what you want," Vivienne said. "Putting Callowans in high office. Kendall is... unreliable, in my eyes. Willing to rebel yes, but also willing to bend with the wind. The Regals are much less prone to that flaw. But you had all these *others* flaws, you see. They had to be fixed before an argument in your favour could be made."

"You try to tame us like a pet," Hadley mocked. "How many will you slaughter, before we bow deep enough for your tastes?"

"Your radicals were already dead," Thief shrugged. "They were too large a vulnerability. We couldn't risk the Tower or the First Prince agitating through them when the armies are at the borders. Hakram argued for acquiring leverage instead of a thinning, but there was only so much of that to be found. Better to be sure."

"Weeping Heavens," Lady Valerie hoarsely whispered. "You own Julienne. You've had her gather every true patriot behind Farron so they can be slain in

a single stroke."

"For months now," Vivienne agreed quietly. "Of course, we won't be the ones throwing accusations. There'd be too much doubt. But before the night is over, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot will come across evidence of the conspiracy. There was some argument about whether leaking a matter under seal was enough, but I won that round. The entire faction will be implicated in your assassination plot. We expect Talbot will bring the evidence of it to the palace within the hour. He'll request a purge himself, and who would doubt the very founder of the Regals if he says there's rot in the flesh?"

The Valewoman spat to the side.

"You use a good man for ugly purpose," she hissed.

"We use all sorts, Hadley," Thief said. "One might argue that is our tell-tale mark. Lady Julienne will sadly be jailed for a time, but eventually manage to squeak away from the fallout with a mere fine due to lack of evidence. And after the remaining Regals gain in prominence, securing the withdrawal of the Liesse proposal, she will stand a lightning rod for any emerging rebellious elements. We learned from the Empire, you see. Best to lead your own opposition if you can."

"How well you have learned the ways of the Enemy," Lady Valerie sneered. "You masquerade as its better while using the same means towards the same ends."

"I'm starting to understand it, just a little bit," Vivienne murmured. "Why she got so *angry* when we talked. Because there's a reason I'm on this side, Hadley, and it's not because I somehow enjoy killing my own people – no matter how misguided they might be. But the Woe? We're small fish in a very large pond. And if you can't even handle us, how could you possibly handle the the Empress and the First Prince? All the while you get all righteous about what we do, but if we actually *gave you the rein* you'd drop this entire kingdom in the fucking deep end within the month. Sure, we're the godsdamned Enemy. You get to have that. That doesn't mean you're somehow fit to rule."

Hadley laughed harshly.

"And who are you trying to convince, villain?" she said. "All this talking, yet beneath all I see is blood spilled out of fear. You know you forge your own doom with every action."

"Doom is our business, Lady Valerie," Vivienne said. "We know it more intimately than you ever could. And as for blood, well..."

Thief smiled coldly.

"I was told, you see, that sacrifices had to be made. So they have been."

A heartbeat later, Lady Valerie Hadley slumped down onto the table. It was impressive, that willpower had allowed her to last that long. She wasn't dead, of course. No, killing one of the foremost Regals in her own home would endanger all of this. But she would sleep like the dead, unable to wake up for at least a day. By which time she would be in a cell, unable to escape and

awaiting her trial. Thief snatched the carafe and drank deep. She wiped her mouth, after, knowing her fingers came away stained as if by blood.

"Long live Callow," Vivienne Dartwick murmured. "And Gods forgive us all."

Chapter 25

Edge

> "My dear Betrayer, I resent this accusation of selling you out to the heroes. No coin changed hands, it was really more of a bartering."
>
> Dread Emperor Traitorous

"I shouldn't need to bring up the grave consequences that would of dealing with that entity in any way," Vivienne noted calmly.

Maybe a little too calmly, I thought. She wasn't angry – I'd learned to read that in her – but she was... weary, maybe. Like she was seeing the same lay of the land I did, and was horrified at what might come of it.

"Heh," Indrani said. "*Grave* consequences. You know, because he's the Dead _"

"Masego," I interrupted. "Would you please smack her?"

"Do I get to pick where?" Archer leered.

There was a pause.

"No," Hierophant replied pensively, and tried to slap the back of her head.

He ended up caught in a wristlock instead, and the two of them toppled to the floor when he called on sorcery to try to toss her away. The two of them fell wriggling as Indrani tried to get on top – no surprise *there*, I mused – and the council was forced off the road until Hakram rose to his feet, grabbed a water pitcher with a sigh and upended it on them both. Archer yelped, Masego looked peeved and I turned the droplets freezing cold out of petty spite.

"Back in your seats," I ordered.

I looked away even as Masego evaporated the water on his robes, pretending deafness when Archer asked him to to the same for her. Juniper growled, which got both their attentions. *Both of you could kill her with barely any effort*, I thought amusedly. *But all she needs to do is growl a bit, and you straighten your backs*.

"Militarily speaking, cooperation with the Kingdom of the Dead would be both boon and threat," the Hellhound said. "Its armies have been strong enough

to weather five crusades: there's no way the Proceran borders can hold if he comes out in force."

"Which would leave us with a fresh liability," Hakram said calmly, seated again. "Namely, that the Dead King would be out in force."

"Forget armies," Thief said flatly. "If it becomes known we struck a pact with the Hidden Horror there is not a nation on Calernia that will be willing to treat with us. The cost of that absurdly dangerous alliance would be that we are made pariahs forevermore. I cannot stress this enough: even the summoning of demons would go over better. The only person to have ever struck alliance with the Dead King was Dread Empress Triumphant at the peak of her power. That will be the precedent everyone sees us through, from that point on."

"We're already fucking pariahs, Thief," Juniper grunted. "I won't pretend working with the Horror would be pastries and flower crowns, but let's be honest: what would we actually *lose*?"

"Any semblance of legitimacy, for one," Vivienne hissed.

"I do not speak in endorsement," Hakram said mildly, cutting through before it could escalate. "But Juniper is not incorrect. We are in varying states of hostility with the Empire, the Principate, the Dominion and the Thalassocracy. The League has already refused to negotiate with us, twice. It may be that situation will change in the future, but it has not yet. As it stands the costs of this decision would not be a direct loss, only the denial of possible change."

"Eh, no need to trumpet it around anyway. We could just be secret allies," Archer said. "Doesn't the old guard love that kind of stuff? He'd probably go for it."

I sipped at my aragh, leaning back into my chair. Indrani wasn't wrong.

"There's more than a few steps between alignment – however temporary – and alliance," I finally said. "Ideally, we would use the King as a distraction with full deniability. I don't think anyone in this room wants him to actually *win* in any measurable manner. If he can launch a failed invasion that takes the pressure off Callow, though, that might be a notion worth entertaining."

"If the dead cross the lakes into northern Procer, it will be butchery," Vivienne said coldly. "Hannoven might be able to resist, heavily fortified as it is, but Cleves and Hainaut? They'll break, Catherine. You know this. Hundreds of thousands murdered and made into abominations. Akua's Folly, forged anew half a dozen times."

"It would be," I said slowly. "If they were taken by surprise."

There was a long moment of silence in the room.

"Are you proposing," Juniper gravelled, "that we *double-cross* the Dead King?"

"I mean," I hedged, "I wouldn't put it exactly like that."

"That means yes," Masego helpfully informed Archer in a whisper. "It's the Callowan uprising. She doesn't like to admit to betrayal."

The Hellhound opened her mouth then closed it, licking her lips. Solemnly, she reached for the bottle of aragh and poured until her cup was nearly overflowing.

"If you would elaborate, please," Thief said quietly.

"So we have a nice chat with Trismegistus," I said. "Shake hands, kiss his dead babies – let's not kid ourselves, he's bound to have a few of those – and plan an offensive. We leak the plan to Procer at least a month ahead, enough time so they can evacuate everything. We time it correctly and Malanza's army will be in a position to march north to fight a delaying action until the rest of the crusaders can reinforce her."

Juniper choked on her drink.

"Hasenbach would have to send most her armies to hold the north," Hakram said quietly. "And suddenly we gain a great deal of leverage. The Army of Callow could easily strike her back and collapse her supply lines. Or, if she makes peace with us, ferry her armies through Arcadia before either Cleves or Hainaut is entirely overrun."

"There would still be a great many deaths," Vivienne said, but she was hesitating.

"No civilians, though," I said. "Soldiers. Loss of property as well, but I'm less than sympathetic to the monetary plight of princes trying to invade my homeland. We can limit the terms of engagement for the Dead King as part of our deal."

"That will no longer hold the moment we betray him," Thief reminded me.

"We can delay that until Procer's in a position to give a good fight," I said.

"It should be remembered," Hakram said. "That if it ever comes out we were involved in the matter, we'll be discarding every scrap of goodwill we have so far accumulated through our restraint."

"We'll deny it. Not like they'll have proof, so it'll be the Hidden Horror's word against ours if he even bothers to say anything. And, to be blunt, Juniper's not wrong. Goodwill hasn't cut it so far," I admitted. "And I think we could get a lot of it back by throwing in with the crusade against the Kingdom of the Dead, even if it comes to that. If it takes leverage to get things done, Hakram, I'm willing to go that far."

"I don't like it," Vivienne said. "This... scheme is not as bad as I first thought it would be, but playing with fire doesn't do the danger of it justice."

"Neither do I," I said. "And I think we can all agree this is a last ditch plan, not the first arrow out of the quiver. I'd much rather cut a deal with Hasenbach herself or the Pilgrim if I can, and I intend to try that as soon as this council is done. But if they're not game, then I think we have to seriously consider this."

I met her eyes unflinchingly, and saw the war taking place behind them. Between the patriot and the decent woman. Better than anyone else in this room, she knew how dangerous the army standing on the other side of the Vales would be to Callow. Thief had always been lukewarm about making treaties with Procer, reminding me there was a reason *Red The Flowers* was a popular song in the country to this day. On the other hand, she was not a killer. She had killed, to be sure, and arranged the death of others. But it was not in her nature, and unlike me she'd never grown used to it. Making common cause with

something like the Dead King, no matter how false the premises, ran against the grain for her. There was a reason it was to her I'd handed the means to kill me. Of all the Woe, she was the only one I could trust to pull the trigger if it came down to it. Her moral compass wasn't exactly pristine. I knew that. She was, after all, a thief. And capable of dark things to keep Callow whole. But she'd yet to lose that spark of decency that none of my other friends could truly claim to have. Not even Hakram, for all that I loved him more than any other. The moment passed, and I did not need to wait to know which part of her had won. The repugnance on her face made it clear enough.

"Before this plan is seriously entertained, there is a great deal to address," Thief said.

Your people becoming warped by your presence, the Grey Pilgrim had said. *Old traits grown more vicious and acute.* Was I slowly breaking down my own contingency? I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with cold.

"Agreed," Hakram said. "Namely, why the invitation at all?"

Juniper set down her cup and it rang empty against the table. She wiped her mouth.

"That's had me wondering," the Hellhound said. "It doesn't seem like he'd need us, at first glance. Out of all his possible allies the gates make us arguably the most immediately useful for an offensive in Procer, but our strategic value is limited."

I glanced at the two bickerers in the back, since this part of the conversation was exactly why they were here. Masego as our expert in all thins arcane, one who'd had access to Tower archives to boot, and Archer as the pupil of one of the few people who was known to have entered the Kingdom of the Dead and returned.

"I can tell you a few things about how Keter is run, and the lay of the city," Indrani said. "But not much more than that. The Lady speaks fondly of him, but that's not surprising – he's probably one of the few entities kicking around she can't kill."

Less than useful. I glanced at Hierophant, who was frowning.

"The only precedent I can think of for the Dead King making alliance is Dread Empress Triumphant," he said. "He was not her equal, but neither was he her vassal. During none of the crusades directed at his realm did he seek Praesi assistance."

"He's launched offensives into Procer before," Juniper said. "We have records of the battles. But they always seemed more like large-scale raids to me. Cities were sacked more to grab people than to grab territory, and I can't recall an instance he went deeper south than northern Brabant."

"*Three Hundred Years Against the Dark*, Amalia Holtzen," Hakram murmured. "I have read the volumes as well, and always found the mentions of his presence with the armies to be somewhat dubious. Nowhere as powerful as a necromancer of his purported strength should be. Chronicles are the crusades

are hard to get by, for us, but in those he's said to have fought heroes. There can be no comparison between the power displayed there and in Holtzen's volumes."

"He can raise Named with some of their power still attached," Archer said suddenly. "The Lady's fought a few."

I blinked at Indrani. Was she implying that Ranger took walks into a poisonous undead-infested wasteland just so she could scrap with – I forced myself not to think about that too deeply. Ranger was fucking insane, trying to figure her out would lead me nowhere.

"You're implying he hasn't led his armies in person since Triumphant," I said, eyeing the others.

"Father has long suspected he cannot easily leave the Hell he rules," Masego noted. "Though the scarcity of solid information on the entity prevents this from being proper theory. The Tower has suppressed most writings ascribed to Trismesgitus since Dread Emperor Revenant was overthrown."

His brow creased, after that, but he said nothing.

"Hierophant?" I pressed.

"It would-" he began, then stopped and sighed. "There have been always been rumours of some High Lords having records of the Secret Wars that Dread Empress Maleficent the Second never managed to erase."

"The what?" Indrani said, leaning forward.

"Bunch of Emperors tried to invade the Dead King's personal hellscape through hell," I told her. "Malicia mentioned them to me once. It went about as well as you'd expect. Maleficent the Second loosed a bunch of demons to erase the whole mess, since it was bad enough Ater itself was about to be invaded."

"That would have been..." Thief said slowly. "Well, I doubt there's a word harsh enough for it."

"Yeah, there's a reason Imperial histories aren't bedside reading," I said. "Unless you enjoy vivid nightmares, anyway. I think I get what you're trying to avoid saying, Masego. If any Praesi city has those records, it'll be Wolof."

The dark-skinned mage inclined his head in agreement.

"It has always been the heart of sorcery in the Wasteland," he said.

I thumbed the collar of my cloak. Where the soul of the former heiress to Wolof was currently kept in captivity.

"Diabolist might know more, then," I sighed.

"She doesn't deserve to get out again," Vivienne said darkly.

"It' be a simpler world," I said, "if people always got what they deserved."

I breathed out slowly.

"I grant you leash," I said. "I grant you eyes and ears, tongue and feet, at my sufferance."

Akua Sahelian made her entrance with the languid grace of a cat at play. My eyes narrowed immediately. There should have been hole in her chest where I'd ripped out her heart with my bare hands, but she stood intact before me. More than that. No dress of red and gold clung to her form: she wore

instead a long gown of trailing darkness, jewels of pure frost glittering around her neck.

"Your Dread Majesty," Diabolist bowed, smiling pleasingly.

"Huh," Archer said. "Even dead she's still a looker."

I blinked, eyes turning to Indrani.

"You can *see* her?" I hissed.

Masego inhaled sharply.

"Anchor," he said, sounding reluctantly impressed. "You made your own prison into an *anchor*. That is impressive."

"A compliment from a practitioner of your skill is worth hearing," Akua said, inclining her head in respect.

"Yes, Cat," Archer contributed helpfully. "We can see her."

I glanced at Vivienne, whose fists had tightened so harshly the knuckles were turning white. Still and silent, she was glaring at Diabolist.

"Akua," I said flatly. "Explain."

"She devoured part of the mantle, I would say, and wove herself into its very fabric," Masego said before she could reply.

"An accurate assumption," Diabolist agreed.

"And so now you're... healed?" I guessed.

"Bandaged might be more accurate a term," she suggested.

"With Winter," I murmured. "Interesting."

I drummed my fingers against the table and exerted my will. Her hand rose, her eyes widened in surprise and she began choking herself.

"That seems unnecessary," Masego said as the sound of rough strangulation filled the room.

"I wouldn't have been able to do that before," I replied without looking at him.

My eyes were still on Akua.

"Nothing without a price, eh Diabolist?" I said calmly. "You've given me a much deeper hold, with that little trick."

"She cannot die through this," Hierophant sighed. "Only feel pain, which a caster of her calibre would have long learned to ignore."

I released my hold and her hand fell as she weakly caught her breath.

"I've not grown any fonder of surprises, Akua," I noted. "You're rapidly heading towards a place where your occasional usefulness is inferior to the risk you pose. I shouldn't need to tell you the consequences of that, should it come to pass."

Diabolist bowed deeply.

"Your chastisement has been heard," she said.

"Might want to do that again, just to be sure," Thief said, smiling viciously.

"If you want to tear out butterfly wings, do it on your own time," Juniper grunted. "Sahelian, do you have knowledge of the Dead King?"

"I have made study of him as a worthy example," Akua replied. "The horrors he has wrought are second to none."

"What does he want?" Hakram asked plainly. "As an entity, what is he after?"

The dark-skinned beauty – Archer, much as it pained me to admit it, wasn't wrong about that part – cocked her head to the side. Thief's fingers clenched even tighter.

"I am bereft of context," Diabolist said. "And so cannot make accurate assessment. A creature whose existence has covered the span of millennia cannot be summarized in a single sentence."

Eyes went to me. No one was going to release information to the shade without my say so.

"He's invited Cat to Keter to discuss an alliance or something like that," Indrani said, picking at her fingernails.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course she would. Archer wasn't one to keep her mouth shut around a pretty anything, much less about things she barely cared about.

"How interesting," Akua Sahelian drawled, and there was a glimmer of something wicked in her eyes. "I suspect that what Trismegistus seeks is a return of the favour. An invitation."

I exerted my will and she slapped herself across the face.

"Once more," I said, "only without the smug cryptic boasting."

"You used to have a better sense of humour," Diabolist sighed.

I raised an eyebrow and eyed her hand. She got on with it.

"This is supposition, I must warn," Akua said. "In matters Trismegistan, certainty is scarce luxury. It is known to my bloodline that the Dead King took the field to lead his armies during the Secret Wars. An event without reflection in his many petty wars with the Principate."

I studied her.

"You're implying there's conditions to him being able to leave his personal hell," I finally said.

"Indeed," Akua agreed. "When crusades laid siege to his realm he took the field to humble the Heavens, yet never when he sought to break Procer. If, indeed, he ever sought such a thing at all. This absence might have been taken a weakness of contentment with what he has already achieved, if he had not also fought the Legions across a dozen hellscapes in person. I believe that asymmetry in action to be indicative of a... restraint. A leash, if you would."

There was a spark of humour in her dark eyes when she spoke that last sentence looking at me.

"He was allied with Triumphant, during her conquest of the continent," Hakram said quietly. "Histories have always seen that as Evil standing with Evil. But considering this..."

"It might have been a condition," I finished. "To let him out at all."

"That sounds," Indrani grinned, "like *leverage*."

Chapter 26

Plunge

> "If war is to be understood as the pursuit of statecraft through violence, then the Principate is a failure as a nation: the Highest Assembly has proved chronically incapable of either agreeing on or seeing through a single ambition through the undertaking of warfare."
>
> Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, A Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly' by Princess Eliza of Salamans

It would have to be Cordelia Hasenbach first. The odds were not in my favour – but when had they last been, truth be told? – yet if this could be settled without the involvement of the Pilgrim it would be infinitely preferable. Now more than ever, every interaction with the Peregrine would carry dangers beyond the obvious. A single careless conversation could see me stripped of power or afflicted with opinions just *slightly* to the side of my own. For all that the Gods Below were the ones with the reputation for manipulation, I'd come to suspect the reason Above wasn't saddled with the same was just that they were better at it. Evil tended to drop the bottom of how far you were willing to compromise and allow you to dig ever deeper on your own when the consequences came calling. Even the most deluded villain, I thought, must have hade one glimmer of cold clarity when they realized they'd brought it all on themselves by crossing that one line they wouldn't have before. Above, though? It dealt in the guise of conscience. A whisper urging you to be the person you could be, if you were just a little *better*. It didn't seem so terrible a thing, until you found that first choice seamlessly leading you into the next and the next and the one after that. Pilgrim had called Evil the edge of the cliff, once, but if that was true then Good was the tired metaphor of the slippery slope. Once you started going down, you had no more control over where you were headed than a cart rolling down a hill.

The revulsion that welled in me at that notion was an old friend, and not one I was willing to part from. Black had gotten to me young enough that

the thought of having my choice taken away from me brought only bone-deep disgust, even for the worst of them.

The cool darkness of my domain soothed the sharpness of the emotions as it filled the room. There would be no shade whispering advice in my ear tonight. Akua already knew too much of my plans for comfort, and though Masego assured me it was possible to learn to make her invisible to the sight of others again it would take me days to properly master the trick. Days I could not afford: an entire month would go by before my opportunity to speak with the First Prince came again. Hasenbach came out of the dark glowing with the weight of miracles in the dozens, her dark blue dress touched by long golden curls. The understated circlet of pale gold on her brow found no match on my side: I wore no regalia tonight, nothing but the worn tunic and boots of a soldier on campaign. It was a truer glimpse of who I was than jewels and gold, though it did lack the expected formality. The First Prince took a moment to gather her bearings, though it was noticeably shorter than the last time. She was getting used to it, or at least getting better at faking situational awareness. I didn't bother with the usual duel of silence that tended to precede our conversations.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I greeted her.

"Your Grace," Cordelia Hasenbach replied.

I hesitated, and in that heartbeat she took the lead.

"It has been some time since we last conversed," the First Prince said.

"I saw no need to waste either our evenings by engaging before there was resolution to the battle," I replied. "There has been, and now here I am."

"It would have been courteous to notify me of this intent," Hasenbach chided me.

"War is the graveyard of courtesies," I said in Chantant, quoting one of her predecessors.

"Julienne Merovins never truly spoke those words," she noted in Lower Miezan, sounding somewhat amused. "It was a courtier under the reign of her successor, and the *bon mot* was only attributed to her fifty years after her death by a family historian."

"It always feels snappier when it comes from someone who wore a crown," I shrugged. "Harder to tell with Dread Emperors, though, since so many of them really *were* that insane."

"Praes does tend to straddle the line between laughable and appalling," the First Prince said. "A tragedy for us all, that these last few decades have seen it settle firmly on the latter."

"Lots of tragedies going around, these days," I smiled thinly. "One might argue we're both in the business of making those."

Cool eyes considered me in silence.

"Shall we empty the proverbial bag before speaking with purpose then, Your Grace?" Hasenbach said. "I suppose you must have recriminations to utter, if only for your personal satisfaction."

"I left personal at the door," I replied. "It has no place in this conversation. Looking backwards just means stepping blind. I'm here, First Prince, because I want to cut a deal. The rest is noise."

"You have shown fondness for that measure, of late," the blonde said mildly. "Your bargain with my subjects was a particularly vicious breed of mercy."

I frowned.

"I spared lives," I said. "Thousands of them. Your own people's lives, it is worth remembering."

"You removed from the campaign for several months a force that would have been too costly to destroy by violence," the First Prince said. "It was cleverly done, and I can respect the achievement, but let us not pretend you meant to save men you attempted to drown mere days earlier."

"That working would have been limited, and only inflicted enough casualties to force a retreat," I said.

She did not quirk a brow, though I got the impression she very much wanted to.

"An easy assurance to make, after the attempt was foiled," she said.

I forced my fingers to unclench and breathed out slowly. *Temper, Catherine, temper.*

"I have taken great pains, Your Highness, to display moderation in how I've waged this war," I said flatly. "At no small cost of my own. There is a point where doubt becomes denial."

"It has not gone unnoticed," Hasenbach conceded, to my surprise. "You must understand, however, that you are a villain. Deception is the trade of your kind. There is a chance, however slight, that you are genuine in your intentions. Yet precedent remains a stone around your neck, as it has been around mine."

"I've wrecked a third of my army to prove goodwill," I said bluntly. "Against the advice of most my generals, it should be said. I have to ask, in your eyes what would actually prove I mean what I say?"

"Abdication," the First Prince replied without hesitation.

"That," I said flatly, "is the kind of demand you get to make if you're winning. You are not. I'm offering a treaty, not serving you Callow on a silver platter."

"Your 'offer' has made its way to Salia," Hasenbach said. "Bringing our hosts to Ater through Arcadia, if I am not mistaken. A process that assumes you will not merely strand those armies in a realm of hostile fae."

"I'm willing to swear oaths I won't," I told her.

"Which would yet leave the Tenth Crusade almost completely dependent on you for supplies, while its hosts bleed their strength against Praesi cities," the First Prince said. "Assuming the occupation of the Empire can be successful under those circumstances, the war still ends with you in a fine position to massacre the weakened armies of Procer and Levant after you spent several years raising armies in peace."

"A possibility that can be warded off," I said calmly, "if I am a signatory of the Grand Alliance. You should have received the scroll by now."

The Warden of the West studied me expressionlessly.

"A well-penned request, observing every requirement as set out by the current treaties," Hasenbach said. "My compliments to Vivienne Dartwick."

It'd actually been Black that sent us a horrifyingly thorough transcript, but I saw no need to disabuse her of the assumption.

"In case you were wondering, it's genuine," I said.

"I assumed as much," the First Prince smiled. "It would, after all, involve suspension of all military action between members and subject any matters of conflict to neutral arbitrage."

"And also involve a declaration of war on the Dread Empire," I pointed out. "Which means Callow won't be preparing to backstab you, it'll be on the front with your own armies. I'm even willing to take the Blessed Isle from Malicia and hold it while your soldiers make their way east as a sign of goodwill."

"You are being deliberately obtuse," Hasenbach said. "I have already informed you that a villain ruling Callow is not an acceptable outcome for this crusade."

"I've been told more than once it's bad form in a negotiation for your starting position to be your *only* position," I said. "A bargain does tend to involve actual bargaining, Your Highness."

The other woman's eyes went cold.

"You are a warlord, Catherine Foundling," she said, pronunciation excruciatingly precise. "Your reign was built on catastrophe and butchery, and has been maintained by the same. You are not the Queen of Callow, or even the Queen *in* Callow. The only claim for rule you have is that of steel, and with every passing month that claim weakens. You believe I am being undiplomatic, evidently."

She paused and her lips thinned.

"That I must even pretend you have the right to speak for the souls under your yoke is a concession greater than any you have right to ask of me," the First Prince said. "Even a usurper would be more palatable: you have merely ridden from one field of corpses to another, waiting and swelling in might from the deaths of your own people until none were left to gainsay your crowning. Well, here we are now. Consider yourself *gainsaid*, Black Queen."

Calm, I thought, as Winter raged. *Calm. Insults don't matter, if you get what you want.*

"And is that the stance of every signatory of the Grand Alliance?" I asked with forced politeness.

"There is not a ruler among us who will tolerate your remaining on the throne," Hasenbach coldly said.

I breathed out. *Calm. Yelling is for children.*

"Abdication within ten years of the signature," I replied instead of screaming. "With the understanding that other nations will have no say in the succession, in exchange for which I will give assurance it won't be another villain."

I saw her visibly master her anger and that had me frowning. A diplomat that practiced, having a fit? It irked me I couldn't read her heartbeat, because I was beginning to realize I might just have been played. The scathing rant had felt genuine, but that didn't mean it hadn't been used as a way to pressure me. Pressure me into giving something I'd been willing to give, sure, but what I'd intended to use as a bargaining chip for further concessions had just been put on the table just to keep negotiations going. Fuck. Horrid as the thought was, I wished I'd had Akua along for the ride.

"Abdication immediately following the end of the crusade," Hasenbach said. "And binding oaths on both it and the matter of succession."

"Five years, regardless of the crusade ending or not," I countered. "I'll need time to settle matters so the succession is stable. Agreed on the oaths."

There was a beat of silence.

"An accommodation might be possible," the First Prince finally said.

I kept my face blank even as relief welled up. Of thank the fucking Gods. I had *not* been looking forward to trying my hand with the Dead King. Ignoring an invitation from the Hidden Horror would likely have consequences, but I was an old hand at lesser evils.

"A truce until it's reached, then," I said. "Including your uncle ending digging operations in the Vales."

"A passage there will be necessary to the prosecution of the war," Hasenbach said.

"In can gate his entire army across the Vales in less than a week, if you don't trust me to get them all the way to Praes," I replied flatly. "Keeping him pointed at my belly can't be considered anything but coercion."

"You are being coerced," the First Prince frankly replied. "That is the very reason we are having this conversation."

I watched her, the strongly-cast face and the patience painted upon it.

"There is a very real chance," I said slowly so she knew I wasn't being flippant, "that agreeing to what you just said will lead to civil war in Callow. It will be seen as annexation, or at the very least effective vassalage. You badly underestimate how hated your people are in the kingdom."

"You have asked me to consider you as the ruler of Callow," Hasenbach said. "Rule, then. Exert your authority to prevent the unrest."

Gods, she was serious.

"No," I said. "I've made *significant* concessions. You want the pass open? Give me more than your word to work with. Withdraw the army, make the truce public. I'll have Hierophant work on a ritual to clear the wreckage, to be used when the treaties have been signed. Otherwise, this is starting to look a lot like I'm baring my neck for the knife."

"I am the First Prince of Procer, not a petty tyrant," Hasenbach replied tightly. "I do not go back on my word once given."

"And I am Callowan," I snapped. "We have more than few songs about the worth of Proceran promises. You're asking me to extend a lot of trust. Do the same damned thing."

"You are overestimating the strength of your bargaining position," she warned me.

"So are you," I barked. "You sent two armies after me, and they both got *whipped out of Callow*. You have Black in your heartlands with four legions and you'd rather argue with me about not putting a knife at my throat than deal with it?"

"I have near every hero on the continent and thrice his number containing him," Hasenbach said. "His survival is a matter of months, if not weeks."

"So this is what it looks like," I said quietly. "An intelligent woman making a very grave mistake."

"Oh, spare me the heaps of praise for the murderer," she said. "He is a skilled general and an effective killer. He is not invincible."

"You are about to get mauled," I said, appalled. "I don't even know what he's up to, but I know that. Sure as day. Gods Below, what about how this crusade has been unfolding could possibly make you this *arrogant*?"

"Posturing will yield nothing," the First Prince said.

"I know what you're trying to do, Cordelia," I said. "You think than in a month we'll be speaking again and I'll have to bend my neck a little lower. Brinksmanship. I need you to believe me, because I'm *begging* here, that it's not what's going to happen. I cannot gamble this entire kingdom's fate, start a civil war, on grounds so thin. I'm already cornered. This is as low as I go."

"Six months ago," she said softly, "you might have said the same. And yet here we are."

I closed my eyes. Should I? Give her even that small assurance I was holding out for? It'd be seen as a capitulation because, to be honest, it was. There'd be riots, and at least half the Army of Callow would desert. Thief might actually kill me. She trusted Procer even less than me. Hells, she might be *right* to if it came to that. There were good reasons I had those contingencies in place. I opened my eyes.

"One last time," I said. "Don't do this. We could avoid so much death – beyond the politics and the interests and the schemes, that has to count for something."

"Appeals to emotion," she said, not unkindly, "are the last resort of one without argument."

I stared at her for a long time.

"I think," I said quietly, "that this conversation is going to haunt the both of us, in years to come."

She hesitated for a moment.

"I am not without sympathy," she said. "But there is more at stake than you know."

It wasn't an opening. Gods, I wished it was, but there was no invitation to negotiate again in the way she was looking at me.

"Woe to us both, then, Cordelia Hasenbach," I said.

I ripped away the darkness and rose to my feet. One last try, before I went into the devil's lair.

—

There were guards around the Pilgrim's tent, a full line. I dismissed them as gently as my mood allowed, which by the way the Taghreb lieutenant paled wasn't very. A few months ago, I thought, I would probably have been frosting everything around me. The old man was awake, even this late at night, and seated at a writing desk with a mage lamp atop it. He was penning something, I saw, on a scroll. That had me curious, however reluctantly. He wasn't allowed letters even as an observer, so what was he writing?

"Pilgrim," I said, lingering at the entrance of the tent. "May I?"

"Catherine," he replied with a kindly smile. "By all means."

I strode into the tent and moved a folding chair from his bedside to face him across the writing desk. He saw my glance at the scroll and chuckled.

"Your Marshal asked me to provide my recollections of the Battle of the Camps," he said. "As much as can be revealed in my position. I believe she may be penning a history of the last few years."

Juniper's 'Commentaries', inspired by the second Terribilis'. I'd known about that, and that Aisha apparently kept memoirs of her own though she was very noncommittal about ever showing them to me. I supposed someone should be keeping records, since I sure as Hells wasn't.

"I'm surprised you're willing to contribute," I admitted.

"I have always thought it a great disservice to all, that histories are so often written by the victors," the hero said. "Much could be avoided by having a broader perspective. If an old man's recollections can be of any help I am glad to provide it."

That was the trouble with the Pilgrim, I thought. He would say those wise, beautiful things and seem to genuinely believe them. But then I'd find him on the battlefield, wielding miracles like a knife for a cause that was as empty as it got. There might be a good man, somewhere in there. I wanted to believe that. But that man answered to the Heavens before anything else. And if I could hold it against Black that he could love me but still set it aside, then I could hold it against this stranger that his pretty ideals only mattered as long as the Heavens agreed they were convenient. They weren't really principles if they were always discarded at the first frown from Above, were they?

"You seem in a pensive mood, tonight," the Pilgrim said.

I weighed the risks, for a moment, then took the plunge.

"I've just had a very exhausting conversation with the First Prince," I said. "So I'd like to be blunt, if you don't mind, because I don't have a lot of coyness left in me."

He didn't seem surprised by the revelation that I had a way to talk directly with Hasenbach, but that meant less than nothing. The Peregrine wasn't someone I'd want to play cards against.

"You attempted to make peace," he said.

I smiled thinly.

"I very nearly did," I said. "But then she pushed just a little further than I can go. And I know, Gods I *know*, that maybe she wasn't out to screw me and everyone in this kingdom. That the other choices I can make are so much worse they're indefensible."

I met his eyes.

"I'm willing to take leaps of faith with people, Pilgrim," I said honestly. "I have before, and I will again. But not with the Heavens. Because you don't negotiate with Above, you *obey*. And I don't think Cordelia Hasenbach holds the reins of what she unleashed nearly as tightly as she thought she would."

"And so now you come to me," the old man said. "With a request."

"Do something," I asked quietly. "Intervene. Offer to arbitrate. Thief tells me you could be king of Levant with a snap of your fingers, if you felt like it. You have influence to wield."

"Seljun," he said calmly. "We do not have kings, in Levant. And there is a reason I do not sit the Tattered Throne, Catherine. Your Good Kings have done well by Callow, but the Dominion... It is a different land. It would end the honour duels, the forays into the wilds, but it would be a *call*. To the kind of war best left in the past."

"I'm not saying usurp your ruler," I said. "But Gods, you're not *nobody*. If you make a truce with me Levant will fall in line. That'll force Hasenbach to reconsider."

"It would break the Tenth Crusade," he gently said.

"So do it behind closed doors," I said, frustration mounting. "You're trying to shove redemption down my throat, and don't bother denying it. Fine. I'll fucking lean in, even if it'll probably get me killed. Just *act*. I'll kiss the hem, quote the Book. All you need to speak up and thousands don't have to die."

"It would smother in the crib," the Grey Pilgrim said sadly, "what is perhaps the last chance for peace in our time."

"I'm *offering* peace," I hissed.

"Peace on your terms would unseat the First Prince," he said. "She has spent years forging an alliance with Levant, fighting her Assembly tooth and nail every step of the way. For that same ally to twist her arm into making a pact with one of the most famous villains alive would see her removed within the month. And everything she seeks to accomplish vanish with her."

A long moment passed and the only sound in the tent was his steady heartbeat.

"You can't be serious," I said. "If you'd said the Heavens were using their veto, I would have been furious. I won't pretend otherwise. But at least I wouldn't be disappointed."

He opened his mouth but Winter flared like half a world howling for blood and he closed it.

"No, disappointed is too mild a word," I said, voice barren of any speck of warmth. "This, Pilgrim, is worthy of *contempt*."

"The treaties she has made and would deepen will end wars in the west," the old man said. "Callow restored and Praes humbled will allow Calernia to finally turn towards the true face of the Enemy. The King of the Dead. The Chain of Hunger."

"It's funny," I said, smiling mirthlessly. "How it's never the lot of you that have to make the sacrifices. Us, this entire fucking kingdom since the dawn of time? Well, that's just how things have to be. Someone needs to take care of Praes so the rest of the continent can kill itself in peace. But then someone else has to do the bleeding, for once, and suddenly there's all these considerations."

"This is not fair," the old man said. "Nor it is just. I will not pretend otherwise, child. But I will not offer you succour at the price of Cordelia Hasenbach's dream. It is too great a good to be slain in this manner."

"So we burn again, for the greater good of everyone else," I laughed harshly.

I rose to my feet.

"You know, when I make decisions like that, they call me a monster," I said, meeting his eyes without smothering a single ember of the fury I felt. "So why do *you* get a pass?"

"I will suffer the price of this, in time," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Service is no absolution."

He looked old and tired and sad. But so did a lot of people, and they didn't sign death warrants for dozens of thousands. I was out of sympathy to offer for the likes of him. I had no pithy comment to offer, no cutting parting remark. I left the tent before I could talk myself into murdering him in cold blood. I needed to talk to Hierophant.

We were, after all, going to Keter.

Chapter 27

Into Dusk

> "The existence of death is the first lie we are taught. There is little difference between a corpse and a man, save the journey of the soul. They who learn to slip this noose find the threshold of apotheosis, for in the denial of passing they have taken themselves beyond the yoke of fate."
>
> Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I'd almost expected an army to be waiting on the other side when I opened the gate into Arcadia, but it seemed my bag of unwelcome complications was full at the moment. And to think, it'd only taken war with half the continent and every hero the Heavens could put together before we'd reached that point! Sadly, I was not unaware that the moment I started believing we'd reached the bottom of the barrel some Choir would pop in, yell *surprise* in a monotone and reveal there was a false bottom below leading into another barrel entirely.

"What's the word they have in the Free Cities, for the snake that eats its own tail?" I asked Hakram.

"Ouroboros," he replied, hairless brow cocking.

There it was. In summary, my life was a veritable ouroboros of bad decisions feeding into increasingly horrible messes. I had to own up to at least that much, headed as we were towards what might just be the worst decision yet.

"You're brooding," Adjutant said.

"I don't brood," I replied without missing a beat.

He rolled his eyes.

"You are looking thoughtfully into the distance, a melancholy air on your face," he said.

"I'm a complicated woman, Hakram," I said. "You can't begin to grasp the depths of my ponderings."

Archer snorted ahead of us. Unkindly so, I decided.

"Like *you* can talk, Indrani," I sneered. "You're about as complex as a rock."

"Geology is a broad and complicated field of study, actually," Masego said.

Archer preened.

"See?" she said. "Even Zeze agrees I'm a woman of many facets. Unlike some others that won't be mentioned."

She turned to grin at me.

"Oh, things are going badly," she mocked in a high-pitched voice. "Better stab my way out of it. But stabbing is bad, for some inexplicable reason. What a difficult dilemma."

I flipped her off.

"Don't expect silver at the end of the trip, wench," I said. "Mouthy guides don't get handouts."

"That'd be very inconsiderate of you, Catherine," Vivienne mused. "She's been such a peach so far. I'll hold onto the coin for her, if you'd like."

"You've already robbed the treasury once, Thief," I replied flatly. "Try something fresh, for Below's sake."

It was pretty inevitable that a journey this, well, boring would see us turn to bickering to pass the time. Hierophant had been rather miffed that we'd kept the supplies to a bare minimum, since it meant he couldn't spell himself atop a horse and crack open a book while we guided his mount. It'd taken three days before he stopped dropping hints this was all very uncivilized. The Woe's only tagalong was my trusty Zombie the Third, and *she* at least wasn't complaining about carrying most our supplies in her saddle-bags. It was a dark day indeed when the dead flying unicorn was the most trustworthy of my companions. I glanced up and sighed when I saw the sun was only beginning to reach afternoon height. We had hours left before making camp.

"We'll reach the outskirts of Winter by nightfall," Indrani suddenly said. "I know this place."

I followed her gaze and found a mound of earth covered in dead grass, maybe half a mile away. We hadn't seen any structures in days, not since we'd passed the demesne of the Count of False Blooming. Three weeks since we'd left Callow, and only now was the throb in the back of my mind that indicated the location of our path out beginning to feel measurably closer.

"I don't think this is really Winter anymore," I said quietly.

Hierophant, who'd been trailing behind and repeatedly weaving cooling spells around himself so he wouldn't sweat for the exercise, put a spring to his step so he could catch up.

"You perceive our surroundings as different, even though they do not appear to be," he said.

I chewed over that for a while before speaking.

"Before I could feel…" I grasped for the word. "Currents, in this place. Skade felt much different from the Summer territories we campaigned on. Archer says we're supposed to be in Winter, but it doesn't feel anything like that to me."

"The wedding of the king and queen of Arcadia might have affected the very nature of this realm, then," Masego murmured. "Interesting. If the effect is permanent, centuries of research on the fae might become useless."

"The less anyone has to do with fae, the better," I said, not unaware of the irony involved.

"Unfortunate that we do not have the time to study the phenomenon in depth," Hierophant said. "Your word alone is not enough. You are ignorant and possibly under influence."

Archer smothered a laugh and Hakram went suspiciously still, like he was trying not to smile. I looked at Masego for a long beat. It'd been said so mildly I knew it wasn't actually an insult, but sometimes I did hope someone would eventually manage to badger some tact into him.

"That was insulting, Masego," Vivienne called out from Zombie's other side.

"Was it?" Hierophant said, glass eyes flicking to the side. "But it was all true."

I patted his shoulder gently.

"We don't call people ignorant, Masego," I told him.

"But the overwhelming majority of them are," he said, aghast.

"And I could spit in your morning tea, but I don't," I said. "Because refraining from doing that makes interacting more agreeable."

He looked less than convinced.

"If they are never informed of their ignorance, how will they be made aware of the need to remedy it?" he pointed out, evidently believing this was reasonable.

"Remember our heroic battle cry, Zeze," Indrani called out.

His expression cleared.

"Ah," he mused. "Lies and violence. I understand."

He turned to me and offered a beaming smile.

"You are well-read and conversant in magical theory, Catherine," he said. "Well done."

Hakram let out a sound that aimed to be a giggle but came out like a dozen angry cats being ground between millstones. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Thank you, Masego," I said, reaching for calm.

He nodded, pleased, and trotted ahead to speak with Archer.

"I *am* well-read," I complained at Hakram in a low voice.

"Compared to him?" the orc chuckled. "There's libraries that would feel inadequate."

Yeah, fair enough. It wasn't like there weren't gaps in Masego's knowledge, but it was hard to beat personal tutoring by an incubus that preceded the Empire and a sorcerer that cut open Creation to find out how it worked.

"I find it interesting, though," Hakram murmured. "What you said, about it feeling different."

I glanced at him, silently inviting the orc to elaborate.

"Have you noticed?" Adjutant said. "The further we stray from 'Winter' territory, the less... alive the landscape become."

"Winter's never exactly been a field of flowers," I pointed out.

He conceded that with an inclination of the head, but did not further agree.

"The mound Indrani used as a marker," he said. "There was dead grass upon it."

"And?"

"Does it look to you like it was killed by snow?" he said.

Frowning, I took a closer look. When snows in Callow melted, the grass below came out yellow or green. From what little I'd seen anyway, I didn't usually campaign in winter and I'd been raised in the city until nearly seventeen. The grass above the mound, though was... grey. I did not feel dead of natural causes. My fingers drummed against my side absent-mindedly.

"Warlock once told Malicia that Arcadia has a degree of symmetry with Creation," I said.

"So you've told me," Adjutant agreed.

"That doesn't make any sense, Hakram," I said quietly. "I mean, fitting journeys through Arcadia with a bird's eye view of Calernia is pretty much impossible but we shouldn't be anywhere close to the Kingdom of the Dead. Maybe halfway through the Proceran leg of the trip."

"There is much we do not understand about the Dead King," the orc said. "It is known he ruled a great kingdom, once but there is hardly any mention of it in the histories."

"Because it was *ancient*," I said sceptically. "And it's not that unusual. No one knows what Ater's original name was, or even the name of the kingdom centred around it. That's what happens when people fuck around with demons."

I'd been taught at the orphanage the reason for the existence of the 'Nameless Kingdom' was likely a demon of Absence, or that the Miezans had used a Censure after facing entrenched resistance. The latter theory wasn't all that popular, since they were known to have use that only a handful of times across the entire lifespan of their empire.

"There are Callowan and Praesi oral histories contemporary to what would have been the Dead King's predecessors," Hakram said. "Yet no mention of a great power in the north."

Which didn't mean all that much, since back in those days most current nations didn't even exist and those that had were pretty much unrecognizable when compared to what they now were. But he did have a point, kind of.

"So you think that he, what?" I said. "Shunted off parts of the kingdom into Arcadia?"

"The elves have done the same with the Golden Bloom twice now," Adjutant said. "It is not impossible. A sorcerer capable of conquering a hell would certainly be capable of achieving as much."

"If he was active outside his kingdom and his hell, someone would have heard of it by now," I said. "I doubt he could gain a foothold in Arcadia without going to war with the courts, anyway. And *that* would have made waves."

"It would now, certainly," Hakram said. "Sorcery has been refined for centuries, states capable of sparing attention outside their borders and immediate threats have emerged. When most the continent wielded stone axes, however? A different story."

Shit. That might actually be true. If it had all turned into myth millennia ago, whatever stories would have existed about it might have grown so different and twisted they were useless as a cornerstone.

"Lots of ifs," I finally said.

"We will find out soon enough," Hakram said. "But there are few entities in existence we should be warier of underestimating than the Hidden Horror."

And on that cheerful note, we joined the others.

—

"So," I said. "Anyone else have a bad feeling about this?"

"Yes," Hakram bluntly said.

"Haven't had a good one in years," Vivienne admitted.

The other two minions ignored me. Indrani's eyes were bright and excited, her stance coiled like she could barely keep herself from running forward. Masego, on the other hand, had gone eerily still aside from his hands and eyes. Which all moved from rune to rune traced in the air, as he let out little noises of surprise or delight whenever one of the colours or shapes changed.

I decided to leave him at it a little longer, eyes turning back to the eerie sight displayed before me. It was a kingdom. Or, at least, the shattered remnants of one. I had not chosen that word lightly: it was not a whole but a collection broken shards left wherever they fell, dropped by the hand of some unknowable god. Some shards seemed like they fit together – for half a mile a lake's shoreline could be seen, with fishermen dragging their boats out under the noon sun – but others were almost painfully disparate. I saw a city street lead into a dark forest, a river flow out of a crowded fair and those were the least of it. In the distance I glimpsed warriors fighting in the pitch black darkness of a plain, next to the almost idyllic view of the sun rising over a peaceful farm.

"Indrani?" I said.

"No fucking idea, Catherine," she said with relish. "I don't even think the *Lady* has seen this before. She would have mentioned it for sure."

Less than reassuring. Either this place was hidden a lot better than it seemed, or even the likes of Ranger preferred to avoid it.

"I'll get the obvious out first," I said. "This looks like the Kingdom of the Dead. Before, well, the last part of that."

"It could be ancient Procer," Hakram noted. "It too has large lakes. So does Callow, for that matter."

"No it isn't," Vivienne quietly said. "Look as far as out as you can see, slightly to the left of the centre."

I squinted before seeing what she was speaking of. It was city. Much too small to be Ater, but it begged for the comparison anyway because at the heart of it jutted a tall spire of dark stone. Atop it was a smaller globe, hovering in the air, and I'd seen that illustration before in books.

"Keter," I said. "Crown of the Dead."

"Inaccurate," Hierophant said. "This is, for lack of a better term, an echo."

His lips were twitching into a delighted smile, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

"And what does that mean exactly?" I asked.

"Reverberation," he said, sounding awed. "An event touched Creation that was so great and momentous it forced reflection within Arcadia. This has fascinating implications, Catherine. There have been few rituals so powerful in Calernian history, but the Diabolist's working at Second Liesse could be considered in the same league. There might very well be an echo of that battle somewhere in this realm."

My fists clenched. So there was a repeat of one of the darkest failures to my name to be found somewhere around? Charming.

"Can it hurt us?" I asked.

"I cannot speak with certainty," Hierophant said.

"Guess," I flatly ordered him.

He looked irritated.

"I can theorize," he stressed pointedly, "that we are in such misalignment with the echo we cannot physically interact with it. With the proper spells perhaps sound could be obtained, but touch or smell are much more difficult. It would take weeks of rituals."

"Which we won't be doing," I said.

"*Cat*," Archer complained. "Think about it. There's bound to be heroes and villains there. We could fight people that had been dead for millennia!"

"Maybe on the way back," I lied.

She pouted.

"Masego, how is this possible at all?" Hakram asked. "I was under the impression that Arcadia spanned the whole of Creation as a mirror of sorts. Was the Dead King so powerful all the world shook from his transgression?"

Hierophant clicked his tongue.

"That is a misunderstanding," he said. "Consider Arcadia as a single object being looked upon by an infinity of perspectives. To every one, it is a different realm. Across the Tyrian Sea, it likely has completely different name and seems inhabited by completely different entities. Even the marriage of Winter and Summer is contained within the span of our gaze only, unlikely to have tremors beyond. It is so with this echo as well. Something that was momentous on our understanding of the world is not necessarily so elsewhere."

"And so Triumphant wept, for she ruled but a fraction of the world and knew it to be vast beyond her reckoning," Vivienne quoted softly. "We are not so important as we like to believe."

"We can debate the philosophical implications of this later," I said. "I'm fairly certain our gate out is in not-Keter. Masego, you're sure that if we walk through a battlefield we won't get stabbed?"

"From our perspective, all of this is akin to light painting smoke," Hierophant said. "We will pass through as if they were ghosts."

He paused.

"Some ghosts," he clarified. "There is actually a very board spectrum of-"

"And forward we go," I interrupted cheerfully. "I'm not sure I trust my ice to get us through the water parts, so we're talking the long way around through-"

I paused, glancing to the right.

"A town burning plague victims," I finished with a sigh. "Charming. Let's get a move on, I'm not spending any more nights in this place than I have to."

That didn't turn out to be a problem, as it happened. Arcadia had a night and day, though sometimes they weren't matches everywhere, but this place obeyed different rules entirely. Every shard seemed to have a lifespan before it returned to the beginning, and most that took place during day or night remained so. There seemed to be no rule or reason to the few shards that lasted longer. We marched through an entirely empty green field for three days and nights as if it were entirely natural, then pushed through a similarly empty mountain pass where the same bird began to swoop down in the same manner every quarter hour. Hierophant found a way to allow us earshot after half a week, though the sounds came muted. Unsurprisingly, Indrani pushed for us to pass through as many battlefields as possible. We took a break to the side of a pitched battle between a few hundred soldiers decked in iron screaming as they charged down a hill and half as many soldiers wearing obsidian and copper breastplates. The howlers were winning even though the opposition had a handful of mages. Those to be seen were a joke compared to even Legion mages: it took clusters of four or five chanting for a while to toss around the kind of lightning bolts my senior mage officers sent down without breaking a sweat. I sat down and watched the killing as the other ate.

"I recognize some of what they're saying," Hakram told me, standing by my side with the remains of his jerky in hand.

"The obsidian guys?" I said.

He shook his head.

"The iron men," he replied. "Some of what they're screaming has common roots with Reitz."

The Lycaonese tongue, spoken only in the mountainous northwestern stretch of Procer.

"That's four times we run into them fighting the others," I noted. "And they win more often than not."

"An invasion?" Adjutant said.

"Maybe," I frowned. "We haven't seen them hit anything larger than a village yet, so raids are more likely."

We ran into our first real city shard two days later. Masego had been getting progressively more irritated by his inability to explain why we could pass through buildings and people but not mountains or hills, but we stumbled unto something that perked him up. Inside a towering house of bricks we found a circle of twelve men and women standing by a wide basin of granite and spilling blood inside from their arms. The oldest among them, a withered old crone, chanted incantations in a language none of us knew that were repeated by the rest. I allowed a half hour break, if only to get him in a better mood. Hierophant in a mood was pleasant for no one.

"Early scrying," he told us, kneeling by the ghostly ritual. "It is Trismegistan in nature, that much can be known by the cadence, but they use no runic stabilizers at all. It is primitive, I'll grant you, but the sheer *skill* involved... Even Father could not use so complicated a formula purely by voice."

We moved on before long. We were all getting restless, the eerie scenes beginning to take a toll, but none more so than Archer. The longer it went on, the more often she started taking walks after we set camp. It was a bad idea, in my eyes. We knew too little about the dangers of this place to wander aimlessly. But more than any of us Indrani had the wanderlust, and I could see how remaining within the dotted lines was getting her temper closer to the surface. I extracted a promise for her not to leave for too long, and left it at that. I'd expected that if any trouble found us it would be through her, but I ended up choking on my words. It was Masego that wandered away without a word, face pale. It surprised me, considering the shard we were travelling through was a battle. One with precious little sorcery involved. The iron men were fighting the soldiers of obsidian again, by far the largest engagement we'd seen. At least two thousand on each side, and the obsidian soldiers were taking a beating. In large part, I saw, because of the empty circle at the heart of the field. Two silhouettes were duelling there. A middle-aged woman with a crown of iron, wielding a heavy mace of stone. Against her fought a man in a tunic of shimmering copper, wearing a circlet of gold-linked rubies. His iron sword was broken in a parry, and then the iron-crowned queen pulped his skull on the grass.

It was there I found Masego. He wasn't looking at the fighting, at the circle of screaming soldiers from both sides surrounding the duel. No, he stood slightly beyond that. His form dispersing a soldier. He was looking at pale-skinned man in furs, chest mostly bare and his neck covered with necklaces of iron and silver. The stranger Hierophant was staring at was beautiful, I decided. One of the most striking men I'd ever seen. It was like someone had ripped out the fantasy of a warrior consort and given it flesh.

"Masego?" I called out.

He did not answer. I hurried to his side, laying my hand on his shoulder.

"Are you in danger?" I asked.

Mutely Hierophant shook his head. After a long moment he spoke. "That," he said, pointing at the man, "is my father."

Chapter 28

Archaic

> "An offer to 'kneel or die' would be insincere, Matrons. Deny me and your corpses will be made to kneel anyway, as I have a chorus of your children scream a cheerful tune."
>
> Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner, negotiating the end of the Fourth Goblin Rebellion

I had a mildly amusing comment about Warlock's unexpected longevity and lack of tan on the tip of my tongue, but I smothered it without missing a beat. Masego, looking at what most likely his second father – the incubus known to me as Tikoloshe – had cast to his face I'd never seen before. He looked *betrayed*. I squeezed his shoulder comfortingly, even though I didn't know the reason for his grief, and did not bother to ask whether or not he was certain of the incubus' identity. Hierophant was not in the habit of make assertions unless he was certain of them.

"Why?" Masego murmured. "He knows I've been trying to piece it all together for years. Gods, what practitioner from the Wasteland hasn't? He was there. He saw it with his own eyes."

He hadn't raised his voice, and in a way that worried me more. Anger I knew well, and how to soothe it. Whatever... this was, I was poorly equipped to handle it.

"He might have been trying to protect you," I ventured.

His hand whipped out and a streak of flame tore through half a dozen soldiers, burning bright blue.

"I am not a child, Catherine," he hissed, "I do not need to be coddled. Refusal I could forgive, but to force *ignorance* upon me? As if I was some meddling hedge mage about to blow his fingers off. As if I was incapable of grasping my own limits."

I heard Hakram stepping lightly behind us, having finally caught up, but without turning I raised my hand and signalled for him to withdraw. More people would only be adding oil to an already volatile brew.

"We don't know for sure he saw whatever ritual wrecked Keter," I said. "He could have been dispersed before that."

"Don't try to appease me," he said, turning to me with a burning glare whose radiance singed the eye cloth over it. "Papa has never been dispersed. His consciousness has been uninterrupted for millennia without a single return to the original shapelessness. His contract ended or he succeeded at slipping the leash."

"Either of which could have happened before the ritual," I pointed out.

"He wouldn't have just left, even then," Masego yelled, to my honest surprise. "He's a deterministic being, Catherine. It would have gone against his nature to flee for a position of influence. Devils *like* being in Creation. It is the only place they can truly learn."

My knowledge of theology had never been all that deep and what I did remember was a little rusty, but I was fairly sure determinism was more or less another word for predestination. Which wasn't all that popular a teaching, in Callow, though it had some adherents in the southern parts of it. Mostly priests.

"You mean he wouldn't have been able to choose otherwise," I slowly said.

Normally even half an admission of ignorance would have been enough to bait him into a lecture. It was telling that he didn't even attempt one, only frowning in irritation instead.

"You don't understand," he said.

I kept my face and voice calm.

"If he didn't have a choice then," I said carefully, "he might not have had a choice in not telling you either."

"You don't understand, you fool," Masego sharply repeated. "I have desired to know the answers here for years. It is in Papa's nature to satisfy desires, and his binding should allow him to do so for our entire family within limits. That contract is one of the single most complex pieces of sorcery in existence, Catherine, Father spent *decades* crafting the closest to the ability to make choices a devil can possibly have. Which means either Father forbade him to speak to me, or..."

"He doesn't see you as family," I quietly said.

"I'm not sure which would be worse," the blind man weakly said. "That Father would bend his will against everything he taught me just to keep me in the dark, or that Papa never once though of me as-"

His voice broke. I winced, sliding an arm around his shoulders and tugging him close. It was awkward hugging him, since he was noticeable taller than me and just stood there like a dead fish.

"Come on," I murmured. "There's a lot we still don't know, Masego. Don't come to conclusions too early."

Slowly, he came to rest his forehead on my shoulder. Gods, the angle must have been Hells on his neck.

"He might have been faking this entire time," he muttered into my tunic. "Since the moment I was adopted. My first memories. Just playing the role, for Father's pleasure."

I'd always thought that Warlock and Tikoloshe had done a decent job of raising Masego, for Praesi anyway. He'd had a golden childhood that taught him to love learning, no real difficulties to face and if he hadn't come out of it with the sharpest moral compass in the world, well – there was only so much you could expect from Wastelanders. It was hard for me to understand something like having your entire childhood put to the question. The orphanage had not encouraged sentimentality. But I could understand, just a little bit, having your trust put on the chopping block. He wasn't the only one with a complicated relationship with a Calamity. Masego withdrew eventually, tiring of my hands rubbing his back soothingly. His face was dry, of course. The day that saw him gain Summer eyes had cauterized his tear ducts as well.

"It doesn't matter," he said through gritted teeth, smoothing his robes. "They can hide secrets from me, but they cannot prevent me from learning on my own."

"You want to continue looking at his," I guessed, eyes turning to the battle still unfolding around us.

Now that the ruby-crowned king was dead, it had turned into a rout for the obsidian soldiers I assumed were ancient Keterans.

"Yes," Masego said with forced calm. "Tell Indrani the duel here is between two Named. That should hold her interest enough she does not chomp at the bit."

I grimaced. Fair enough. I didn't really want to spend any longer here than we had to, but if it got his head in order I'd compromise. There was a part of me, that whispering voice that never really went away, that noted this was perhaps the best occasion I would ever get to turn Hierophant against Warlock. To get him firmly on my side before the day of reckoning I knew deep in my bones was over the horizon came upon us. All I had to do was ruthlessly exploit the grief of one of my closest friends in the world. It would be for his own good, too. When the dust settled at the end of the Tenth Crusade, there was a real chance that close ties to Praes and the Calamities might get Masego killed. After Akua's Folly there would be wariness about powerful sorcerer Named, but if he had a war record of fighting against the Empire... I clenched my fingers and snapped that voice's neck before burying it in a shallow grave. I was not above manipulating Masego. I would own up to that. But if I did, it would only ever be to help him. Not to rip away all his ties but those that kept him at my side.

"I'll speak to the others," I said quietly. "Don't do anything dangerous. I'll be back as soon as possible."

He did not answer, light already blooming around his fingers as his face hardened and he began tracing runes. I took that for the dismissal it was.

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"He's been at it for at least twelve hours straight," Hakram said.

The worry in his tone was subtle enough a stranger wouldn't have caught it. It was plain as day to me. The two of us stood at the edge of our makeshift camp – raised far enough from the main engagement that at the peak of the battle the war cries wouldn't wake us – and watched Masego's lone silhouette. He'd not eaten since he began. Indrani had tried to bring him bread and water, but she'd run into a transparent pane of power she'd not been able to break through. Her screaming had gone unnoticed as well. He'd killed the sound from outside the boundary, was my guess.

"He hasn't even sat down once," I grimaced. "And he's been using sorcery the entire time. Named or not, he should be about to collapse."

"We'll pick him up when he does," the orc sighed. "Put him in Zombie and get away from here while he's unconscious. This is unhealthy."

"He's always been prone to obsession," I admitted. "We all are, but he's further down that slope than any of us."

"This is different, Cat," Hakram said. "If he begins a trance when studying spellcraft, we can ease him out of it after a few hours. Even Thief knows how, and she's known him the shortest. But putting up wards to keep us out? He's never gone that deep before."

"Family fucks you up," I said. "So I've heard, anyway."

"We're what he has," the orc told me. "His fathers let him loose after he joined us, and you've heard the same stories I have. They were always highly permissive, even when he was a child. If we don't keep him at an even keel, there's no one else."

I passed a hand through my hair tiredly.

"You know comfort's not my strong point," I admitted.

"He doesn't need a friend," Hakram replied. "He needs someone to tell him it's enough. A figure of authority."

I glanced at the tall orc uncomfortably.

"That's not really how I've run the Woe," I said.

"And you were right to do so," Adjutant said. "A heavier hand would have alienated Archer and Thief before they joined us. But Hierophant is Praesi. He was raised by the Calamities, Catherine. He understands, instinctively, that in a band of Named there is someone who gives orders. That is you."

"It's one thing to give orders on a battlefield, Hakram," I said sharply. "It's another to pull strings off of it, in private matters. I won't pretend we're equals in all things, but I try not to tell any of you how to live your lives unless I can't avoid it."

The orc's dark eyes flicked at Masego's lonely silhouette.

"And does he look to you," he said calmly, "like he benefits from this restraint?"

I grit my teeth.

"You're not *tools*, Hakram," I said. "I won't shape all of you into something more useful to me. That's not a road I'll wander down, ever."

"There is a difference between intervening for our sakes and self-serving manipulation," he gravelled. "You pretend not to know this, because asserting the authority you were given of us makes you uncomfortable. That is one of the most selfish, disparaging things I've ever seen you do. Do you think we swore oaths and made pacts because we were swindled? That you tricked us into putting faith in you? Are you the only one of us that can extend trust?"

"That's not what I said," I replied.

"Words are nothing," the orc said. "Actions speak louder, and the decision not to act is an act of itself."

My fingers clenched and I glared at Adjutant.

"And my judgement's always worked out so well, has it?" I hissed. "I carry an entire *funeral procession* of blunders behind me, Hakram. One of the most recent got a hundred thousand people kill, and we're heading towards a place where I might just top that."

"We all sat there, in the room," the orc said. "We heard the same arguments. We know the same truths, and the plan they spawned. Yet here we all are, travelling with you. Did you somehow enslave us without my noticing? All of us chose to be one of the Woe, Catherine, knowing full well what that meant. Our hands have not been forced."

I always hated arguing with Hakram. He was so infuriatingly calm and reasonable.

"Fine," I said. "I'll tell him to cut it out."

Adjutant raised his hand to stop me.

"Do not bury this," he said. "Pretend it was the argument of a single instance and move forward as before. I care nothing for your crown, Warlord. Or whose apprentice you were. I put my trust in *you*, as did the others. You do all disservice by acting as if it was a mistake to do so."

My lips thinned and I met his eyes. He'd only ever called me by the old orc title when it was a matter of utter seriousness we spoke of. Which meant he'd been sitting on this for a while, waiting for the right moment to bring it up. Reluctantly, I nodded. His hand went down, and I strode for Masego's one-mage lightshow. I felt the wards even though I couldn't see them. My fingers trailed across their surface, transparent sorcery forming wherever my hand touched. I rapped my knuckles once, but it was like hitting a solid wall. I heard Indrani turn towards me in the distance, but did not look. Breaking the wards might hurt Masego, so I'd have to show a little moderation. I seized Winter, wove its power into a maul of ice tall as I was and grasped the handle. I squared my footing more out of habit than true need: the construct was light as a feather to me. I smashed it into the ward once, twice, thrice before Hierophant finally stopped tracing runes long enough to look at me. Dropping the maul, I gestured for him to end the ward. He shook his head.

"Now," I said flatly.

He flinched. He tapped a sequence among the runes hovering around him and a door opened before me, made visible by the transparent power that

formed the cadre of it. I walked in, dismissing the maul with a flick of the wrist.

"Catherine," he said. "I'm not hungry. There's no need to-"

"You've been at this for twelve hours, Masego," I said. "It's done. You rest, you eat, and then we discuss our next move."

"Not now," Hierophant said, "Not when I'm *so close*."

"To what?" I replied, eyebrow rising.

"Walking the true span of the echo," he told me. "Not true interaction, no, but the full witnessing of it. As if I were truly there."

I glanced sceptically at the ghostly battle.

"And?" I said. "What does this gain you?"

"This isn't an illusion, Catherine," he said. "It's a reflection of the state of Creation at specific points in time. The echo of an individual includes all that individual knew then. If I can carve out that knowledge and translate it into a form I can understand-"

"You'll learn a lot," I interrupted. "That's fine. You want to work on that project? I've got no objection. But you do it right. You sleep, you eat, you talk with the people who love you. And you do it at a rate that doesn't make a wreck out of you. There'll be more interesting shards deeper in anyway."

"It would only be a few more hours," he said.

"Then it won't matter where those are spent, will it?" I patiently said. "Or is there something specific to this shard that makes it easier to work with?"

He looked away. So there wasn't. I took him by the arm and dragged him until he began walking on his own.

"Come on," I said. "And while you're at it, you're apologizing to Indrani."

He frowned at me.

"What for?" he asked.

"That, for one," I grimly said.

Godsdamnit Hakram. It'd be easier to be angry at him if he wasn't right so often.

—

We moved forward, to everyone but Masego's relief. The five of us had taken to talking as we passed through the landscapes, trying to piece together the story unfolding. It was made more difficult by our inability to tell the sequence the shards took place in, which even Hierophant admitted he was unable to discern. That spawned the game of 'tell me how Keter fell', which allowed us to whittle away the hours as we walked. We tried, one at a time, to piece together what we'd seen into a coherent sequence.

"All right, bear with me on this one," Indrani announced.

I sighed at the sight of the silver flask in her hand. It was barely noon – probably – but I was less appalled by the drinking than by the fact that she seemed to have an endless supply of booze. Where the Hells was she keeping it all? If Thief had been holding the liquor, she wouldn't offer it up nearly that often.

"Do we have a choice?" Vivienne drily asked.

"Don't you drag theology into this, Dartwick," Archer drawled. "Anyway, this is how Keter fell. So there was a witch queen with a nice big mace, but she was a woman with *needs*. So she hit up the King of Keter and she made the bedroom eyes, but he was weird about it. You know, have her the brush off. So then-"

"No," I said.

"No," Hakram agreed.

"Gods no," Vivienne muttered.

"Seems unlikely," Masego conceded.

"You're all joyless," Indrani complained. "Mine had everything. A lovers' spat, sex and violence and revenge. It was going to be worthy of song."

"For mouthing off after your turn was ended, you get skipped next go around," Vivienne noted.

Archer muttered something sounding pretty insulting under her breath, though I didn't recognize the language.

"Hakram?" I said.

"This is how Keter fell," Adjutant gravelled. "There was a plague in the borderlands of the kingdom that took a great toll. The queen of the iron men saw weakness and struck with raids, only to find the soldiers of Keter weak. She assembled more men and invaded the kingdom, forcing battle and slaying the king on the field."

We'd seen more and more plague shards over the last two days, so he might actually be right. Only towns and villages so far, though, we'd found no city being afflicted. The battles were becoming more frequent as well, though few were as large as the one where Masego had found his father. After a few days passed Hierophant was forced to admit that a mere few hours before his breakthrough had been an optimistic assessment. He still spent most of his downtime working on his 'witnessing', but we'd all gotten used to hearing he was going to finish it any moment now. We saw our first Keteran victories, most of them won through sorcery. The sorcerers gathered in small cabals and struck with rituals, the brutality of them increasing the farther we went in. Lightning and fire were traded for spells that boiled blood or broke minds, and once or twice we even saw the Keterans fielding devils of their own.

Small numbers, and not particularly impressive specimens. Closer to imps than the Wasteland's favoured meat shields the *akalibsa* and *walin-falme*. Hierophant dismissed those we saw as being from some of the easiest Hells to reach, and noted that diabolism as a branch of sorcery was one of the magical disciplines that benefitted the most from the passing of years. It had taken centuries for the Praesi to accumulate names to call on and to learn the secrets of the most useful Hells, the line of every High Lord building on the knowledge earned by the previous generation. His assessment was that diabolism had not been a favoured sorcery of the Keterans, but that in their desperation they

were turning to cheap solutions to turn the tide – like barely sentient devils that could be bound through simple shedding of blood.

"His successor, Trismegistus, found his kingdom on the verge of breaking as the iron men pushed further in," Hakram continued. "Rather than face defeat, he unleashed devils and turned the remainder of his people into undead to bring revenge unto the invaders."

He got a vote of agreement from everyone save a pouting Indrani, which was just enough to bar him from getting a swig of the bottle of aragh Thief had pulled out. Archer was a sore loser. Adjutant's story was the most believable so far, though the rest of us moved around the mosaic tiles again and again in order to see if something else fit better. We realized the underlying mistake the day after, when we encountered the most striking shard yet. We'd assumed we had all the necessary tiles to tell the story, you see. We were disabused of that notion when we found the first landscape out of Keter itself. It was the funeral of the king we'd watch die, his body tastefully covered by a shroud so the pulped head could not be seen by those attending. Among those present in the great crypt where the entombment took place was the young man I was fairly sure became the Dead King. Not because of anything he did, but because of who was talking to him. The face I didn't recognize, I'd admit. But the shoddy lute and the flask? Those I'd recognize anywhere.

They belonged to the Wandering Bard.

Chapter 29

Sixth

> "Don't be absurd, Black Knight. It would have been called treason if I'd lost – this is merely succession."
>
> Dread Emperor Vile the First

It was a striking scene.

The crypt itself was the part worthiest of awe, I decided. The arched ceiling was covered in silver set with glittering jewels where stars would have been on the night sky. There was no light within save for their shine and a ring of bound sprites serving as magelights. The fallen king was being set down in a tomb with his likeness sculpted atop the lid, men and women wearing copper circlets on their brows lowering him gently. There were low whispers in a smattering of tongues I did not know, but the funeral was a hushed affair. I did not linger to watch when the orations began after the lid was shut, instead approaching the sight that had set my blood running cold. The Wandering Bard looked prettier than I'd ever seen her. Tanned and full of life, she wore red and silver robes instead of the usual stained leathers. The lute was set across her lap in the shadowed alcove where she sat, and she pulled at her flask between exchanges with the young man standing next to her. Him I took my time studying. How often did one get to have a glimpse of the Dead King before he earned that Name?

I'd expected him to be darkly handsome or strikingly ugly, but he was nothing of the sort. Pale, even compared to the other Keterans, but not near corpse-like the way Black was. More like a scholar who did not see much of the sun. He had bushy eyebrows and full lips set on an unremarkable face, the only striking part of him the light brown eyes that looked almost golden in the magelight glow. He looked like a scholar, I thought. One only an inch taller than me, though few of the Keterans were tall. No real muscle to his frame, though his hands were surprisingly calloused. The copper circle on his brow was even more slender than those I'd seen on the other royals. A mark of status? Perhaps. The others *had* looked older, they might be higher in the line of succession. Or he

might have been from another branch of the royal family. Hard to tell when I knew nothing about how the kingdom was ruled. Even without understanding the words he spoke, I found his voice compelling. Calm and deep, it felt almost soothing. It was hard to tell much about intonation in a foreign language – everything spoken in Kharsum sounded like a threat, for example – but he did not seem worried or surprised by the Bard's presence.

Had he known her? Had she been involved in the fall of Keter from the beginning?

"You're sure it's her?" Hakram quietly asked.

I'd been so lost in contemplation I hadn't even heard the orc approaching. I nodded without a word.

"The lute and the flask," I said. "It's her."

"They both look different than at Summerholm," Adjutant said.

I blinked and glanced back at the Bard. He was right, I realized with a start. The flask was still of that same strange curved shape, but instead of old scuffed iron it was freshly-polished copper. The lute was not of the same wood, this one paler, and the strings looked different. Animal tendons of some sort.

"The substance changed," I murmured. "But the shape hasn't. There's something to that."

"Named tend to have symbols and artefacts associated to them," Hakram noted. "Save for the Carrion Lord, though the loss seems to have been made up in epithets. The lute and flask could be hers."

"Malicia warned me they'd moved the Bard to the Empire's official kill list, after the war in the Free Cities," I said. "I thought Black was talking her up too much because she pulled one over him but I'm starting to see his point, if she's had her fingers plucking strings this far back."

"We don't know for certain her consciousness has been uninterrupted all this time," Adjutant cautioned.

"You read the transcripts Black sent us," I grunted. "Hells, I've had you lug around the threat assessment he had delivered to the palace – half a book's worth of scrolls, in records and theories. She made references to events long before she popped out of the woodworks as Aoede of Nicae. That's at least two or three incarnations. It's an assumption to say she's been at it this whole time, sure, but it's not a *bad* one."

"Yes," Hakram agreed quietly. "And the voluntary sharing of that secret worries me, Cat. It would have been a sharp blade, if kept hidden. Why did she not keep the knife in the dark?"

Yeah, there was that. If there was a meddling face-changing immortal wandering around the continent, why had no one ever written anything about it? Names tended to grow stronger – if also more restrictive – the more stories were associated with them. She would have had thousands of years to build herself up into something pretty much untouchable. And even if s*he* wanted to keep quiet and stay behind the curtains, it struck me as dubious that every single hero she'd helped had kept quiet about. Over the years, there was bound

to have at least one blabbermouth that fucked up. *Unless Above ordered them to keep quiet*, I frowned. That was... plausible. Didn't explain why no Dread Emperor had ever tried to get out the word there was an opponent on the field of that calibre, after being beaten or figuring it out. I was smelling a rat her.

"That," I slowly said, "is a very good question. If she's been underfoot this whole time and no one was onto her, why did she let that out of the bag *now*? What changed?"

The tall orc by my side considered the two legends speaking before us and clicked his teeth in discomfort.

"I suspect," Hakram said, "that knowledge of their words would bring more questions than answers."

"This is too big to walk past," I told him. "Masego will have his hours. Tell the others we're setting camp."

I stayed there a while longer, watching the Wandering Bard laugh at something Calernia's incipient greatest monster had said. I shivered at the sight. I felt like they were sharing a joke that no one else could understand.

I was really coming to hate that feeling.

—

"We cannot linger for too long, Catherine," Vivienne said. "I understand the draw of learning such a secret, but it will not help Callow withstand invasion."

I drank from the skin. Tough our supplies were beginning to run thin, at least there was no need to worry about going without water. I could fill the skin with ice with only a thought, then leave it to melt as the hours passed. Indrani had badgered me until I used the eldritch and fearsome powers of Winter to cool her wine, to no one's surprise. The indignity was somewhat alleviated by the fact that the first thing Juniper had ever told me after I claimed my mantle was that my ability to freeze thing would ease strain on supplies for the Fifteenth. No one but Masego seemed to treat my usurpation of a demigod's power as anything but a source of free ice and entertainment unless I was actively killing people with it.

"We're putting all our bets on the Dead King, Vivienne," I disagreed. "An entity we know next to nothing about. We're carrying the finest offer our diplomats were able to put together, but we're still going into this *blind*."

"Whatever he might have been while living, millennia have passed," the dark-haired woman replied. "Any understanding gained would be highly dated."

"Undead can't change nearly as much as the living," I pointed out. "I'm guessing a lot will still apply."

"We trade guesswork for hours, then," Thief said flatly. "This is a gamble, let us not pretend otherwise. The decision was made on the assumption we would know little about our interlocutor. We might be able to change that, if Masego pulls through. To an extent. But we all agreed on the initial premise for a reason. Time is our most dangerous enemy, at the moment."

"I'm not saying we should spend a sennight here," I said. "But a few days? The payoff is worth the delay."

"If there is one," Vivienne sighed.

I looked at her closely. Of all the Woe she was probably the one who'd dealt with the restlessness of our journey the best. Even Hakram, island of calm that he was, happened to have a vague look of chagrin on his face now and then – like he was expecting to have work to do and was kind of irked he didn't. Thief had been quiet, so far, almost subdued. But she'd refrained from pulling my metaphorical pigtails like Archer did and kept her eye on the horizon unlike Hierophant. The irritation now coming across clear had me wondering if she'd just been hiding it better than the others. She was certainly the hardest to read of the Woe. For others that crown might have belonged to Adjutant, but I knew him like I knew my own limbs.

"You're worried," I said.

She sent me a look that implied less than complimentary things about my intellect.

"Not just the usual stuff," I dismissed. "This is about all of us leaving."

"The Grey Pilgrim is unsupervised," she said.

"The Pilgrim is under house arrest, allowed to speak only with goblins and Prince Amadis," I replied bluntly. "If he can turn *Robber* to Good, I'd argue he actually deserves to win this war."

"It feels like negligence not to keep a closer eye on them," Vivienne sighed.

Most of the time, with Thief, the trick to understand her was not to listen to what she said. It might have been because of her Name, but she tended to go obliquely at matters. The only way to get a good read on what she had cooking behind the forehead, if she wasn't willing to outright state it, was to figuring out the reasons behind what she said. In this case, she was speaking of Callow but I suspected Callow itself wasn't the point.

"You've been cut off from the Jacks," I said suddenly.

She looked away. Ah. There it was. Possibly beyond even me, Vivienne Dartwick was the individual in the Kingdom of Callow with the most information at her fingertips. Hakram was the one piecing together the reports from her Jacks, the Dark Guilds under Ratface and Aisha's web of relatives to send up the most important reports to me, but that was more administrative than a matter of authority. I just didn't have the time to read it all and see to my other duties as well, not even now that I no longer slept. But Thief had access to all of it as well, and as the head of my net of informants she wielded the power to send agents to unearth any secrets she wanted. It must have been like an itch she couldn't scratch, being removed from the centre of the web to go traipsing around Arcadia.

"I understand the necessity of committing to this," Vivienne said. "And the risks that bringing any but Named into Keter would have carried, along the vulnerability of leaving only one of us behind. But we are blind to all the happenings in Creation until the matter is dealt with."

It'd be exceedingly difficult to scry back home from Keter, admittedly. Unlike Malicia and Black I didn't have decades' worth of mages trained in scrying

to create relays all over the continent that delivered reports within hours. My limited number had to be placed very strategically, and had largely focused on Praes and Procer. Moving it all around so we could get in touch with the Observatory around the natural barriers surrounding Callow wouldn't be impossible, but it would screw up our eyes abroad for months. Months where we could hardly afford to be blind to movements within the borders of our most dangerous neighbours. Not something to use except in case of dire emergency.

"It's not a gamble if we're in control the whole time," I told her gently.

"I know," she said, passing a frustrated hand through her short hair.

I'd thought the cut a little too rough, when we first met, but it had grown on me since. Long hair on Vivienne would have felt odd now.

"We are taking so many risks, Catherine," she said quietly. "And every one of them seems reasonable when the decision is made, but I look back and wonder if what we have built is a house of cards."

"It does feel like everyone is out for our blood, doesn't it?" I chuckled bitterly. "Gods, we know we're at the end of the rope when the Hidden Horror is the best ally on the table."

"That is a too great a decision for us to really understand the scope of its consequences quite yet, I think," Vivienne said. "It is the small things that worry me."

The glanced she flicked at the collar of my cloak was all she needed to say. I did not immediately reply. The two of us sat on the granite tomb of some dead queen and watched Hierophant weave his runes in the distance. He'd been at it for half a bell, now, and the breakthrough he'd been speculating about was nowhere in sight.

"She could accelerate his work," I said, keeping my eyes on Hierophant. "Masego tells me that the doomsday fortress had similarities to the Greater Breach at Keter. There's not a lot of more knowledgeable mages to be found, either."

I did not need to speak the name of the woman in question. We both knew who I was speaking of.

"She," Vivienne said with admirable evenness, "has not been punished."

My brow rose.

"I ripped out her heart and bound her soul to the cloak," I replied. "I'll admit it hasn't exactly turned out to be eternal screaming torment, but at the very least it's imprisonment with a dab of torture."

"Yet now she plies her powers in your service," Thief said. "Safeguarded from all her former enemies. She has made herself useful, and so the leash loosens. How long, Catherine, before practicality pries open the door entirely?"

"I haven't forgotten Liesse," I said coldly.

"Peace," the other woman said, hand rising. "I helped you draft the Accords, Catherine. I've seen that look in your eyes when you think yourself alone and you remember the breadth of the massacre. I know the failure shames you still. I've seen your fury at the architect of the massacre."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted.

Aside from effectively admitting she sometimes spied on me unseen, but I'd honestly considered that to be a given. The notion of privacy was something I'd resigned myself to having lost even before an invisible sneak thief joined the Woe.

"I told you once, that Akua Sahelian treading Creation again was a line," Vivienne said. "One desperate hour after another, we have walked past it."

I grimaced. I could have made an argument that back then we'd been speaking about the soul she put in the infant as her resurgence plan, or even that all I'd ever allowed to pull at the leash was a soul, but it would have been dishonest. I *had* allowed Diabolist a foothold back in Creation, like it or not.

"You want me to destroy the soul," I guessed.

Vivienne laughed, something vicious glinting in her blue-grey eyes. It was a little fucked up, I admitted to myself, that it made her look more attractive to me. Not that I expected anything to ever come of it. Thief was so painfully straight I could have used her as a ruler.

"I have learned," she said, "the uses of pragmatism. No, let her continue to exist. Let her out, even. She has uses, and the hour has only grown more desperate. Another face will even make Indrani less of a pest for a while."

"But," I said.

"For small slights, long prices," Vivienne Dartwick said harshly. "Let Akua Sahelian see the light and taste freedom. Let her believe she has slipped the noose, so long as she remains of use."

Thief's fingers clenched.

"But there will be a day where the world we made no longer has place for her," Vivienne said. "When we have faced all the horrors before us. And on that day, when she has glimpsed victory?"

Vivienne met my eyes and there was something in them that gave even Winter pause.

"Snuff her out, Catherine," she said. "Slowly. Painfully. Excruciatingly aware of what is being taken from her."

I shivered, both out of respect at the viciousness of what she was proposing and a little bit of arousal. Gods, it was a tragedy she only rode stallion. I pushed that guilty thought aside and gave the moment the seriousness it was due. Should I hesitate at effectively letting our Akua with the intent to murder how down the line? Gods, that I even had to ask. I would have seen no nuance there to be had, when I'd been seventeen. But I hadn't had a kingdom on my shoulders, back then. And I hadn't looked Akua Sahelian in the eyes as she told me nonchalantly she was going to slaughter a hundred thousand innocents to use as fodder for her ambition. Putting a knife in her back wasn't somehow made moral by Diabolist being a mass murderer, but it was the kind of petty evil I had made my tools of trade. Fair dealing and mercy were no longer things that applied to people willing to butcher an entire city for their purposes.

"It could be years," I warned her. "Before we're out of opponents. We could die before that, too."

"I know," Vivienne said. "Let her follow us in death, if that is our lot. Otherwise my words stand."

I spat in my palm and offered it up. Thief was not the kind of maidenly flower who balked at spit, aristocrat or not, so she did the same without hesitation.

"Bargain struck," I said, and we clasped hands.

"Bargain struck," she echoed.

We rose. I spoke the words, and Akua Sahelian walked the world again.

—

I had two of the finest mages of our generation working on a solution, and yet half a day later here I was: standing with a scowl on my face, being told nothing I wanted to hear. Hierophant at least had the decency to look as frustrated as I felt. Akua's lips were just slightly quirked, not enough for it to qualify as a smile but enough to reveal how pleased she was to be out of the box and talking magic with one of the few people in existence she'd consider a peer.

"The issue has been the same since you interrupted me," Masego said, a touch accusingly. "I have yet to succeed in accounting for the disparity in alignment."

"We can hear what they say now," I pointed out. "You managed touch for a little bit yesterday."

"The formula was a dead end," Diabolist said. "The runes involved would have disrupted further addition. Consider them an ore that spoiled the alloy."

It kind of pissed me off that my dead rival was better at explaining sorcery to me without sounding condescending than one of my closest friends.

"But you *were* aligned," I pressed.

"Not in the right manner," Masego irritably said.

"The difference was not unlike reading of a river on parchment while seeking to swim in one," Akua smiled. "Result was achieved, but along a different path than desired."

Yeah, still pissing me off. I suspected that was going to happen a lot.

"It might be that this is impossible to achieve within the bounds of Trismegistan sorcery," Hierophant said. "We've been speaking of different perspectives, but most of them are so glaringly fallible or unusable by humans my studies of the subject have been shallow."

"We only have so much time to spend here," I reluctantly admitted.

"You demand the miraculous on the schedule of the shoddy," Masego muttered, then paused.

His saw his glass eyes turn to peer behind him while the rest of his body remained still.

"Could it be that simple?" he said.

"You've dealt with miracles before," I encouraged.

"I've vivisected and employed parts of them," he corrected absent-mindedly. "But the gap is one of understanding, and I have a mechanism at hand to correct that failing."

I felt him gather power without ever chanting or drawing a rune. Not shaping it for a spell, I thought. Drawing it into himself. I opened my mouth to ask, but Akua discretely shook her head.

"A mystery," Hierophant muttered to himself. "In the technical sense. Foolish, foolish. I saw, when in transitioned. Quantification is anathema to higher sorceries."

His hand shot out and he clasped my wrist.

"Yes," he grinned. "They will not deny me, be they Gods or fathers. I will **Witness**."

A ripple passed across the world, and what it left behind was no longer an echo.

Chapter 30

Witness

> "There is only one lesson to be learned from shatranj: no matter who wins the game, the pieces return to the same box."
>
> Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

I'd never been in crypt before but it smelled about what I'd expected. Cool, wet stone and a little like dust. The scent was heavy and cloying, but it wasn't the reason I felt rattled. I almost withdrew my wrist from Masego's grasp before realizing that might get me expelled from... whatever this was and froze instead. Splendidly uncaring of my wariness, Hierophant let my wrist go the moment after. I looked around. Still here. I'd say that was good to know, but I understood next to nothing about what was going on. That was an unpleasantly familiar feeling, truth be told.

"Masego," I whispered. "Can they see us?"

We were on the outskirts of the crowd but there were a few attendants close by near a sculpted ramp leading upwards. If they could see us, we'd stick out like sore thumbs. Neither of us could pass Keteran by skin tone alone, much less if clothes were brought into it. Hierophant shook his head.

"We can only subtract from this, not add," he mused.

That loosened some of the tension in my shoulders, so I allowed myself to take a slower look around. We were at the beginning of the shard, by my reckoning. Most of the grievers were still filing in, and it'd be about half an hour before they king's corpse was brought in. Less than that before the Bard walked in from a place not within the shard and sat down next to Trismegistus, though. Two of the attendants a little higher up, veiled young women, spoke in a low voice. I frowned.

"They're still speaking Keteran," I said.

Masego turned to me, lips curving in a sharp smile.

"Subtraction, Catherine," he said, "does not preclude acquisition."

My brow rose.

"You can ransack their brains," I said.

"Don't be absurd," he replied. "The actual brain matter is long gone. I can appropriate an echo of their consciousness, including working knowledge of their language."

I blinked in surprise.

"Wait, that's something you can do?" I said. "You can dig out an entire dialect from someone's head and put it in someone else's?"

That would have been damned useful to know. Wouldn't have had to spend so many evenings trying to learn Chantant if there was a shortcut like that. Without Learn to help me along, I'd come to the realization that my talent for languages was average at best and that the most widespread language in Procer was a horrid chore to learn. So many fucking exceptions and whoever had decided that plurals for masculine and feminine names – or even that there should be any of those – deserved to be drawn and quartered. If it'd been a possibility to lift that knowledge out of the heads of criminals, with consent and a reduced sentence dangled in exchange, I would have taken it.

"Theoretically speaking," Masego agreed. "Of course a living mind is much more complex to excise information from than what can be found in this imprint. Likely the extraction would break the source entirely, what would be obtained would be contaminated with connected gibberish and the bestowal itself drive the recipient mad. Human minds were not meant to process that much knowledge instantly."

I grimaced. Yeah, it figured. Should have known that if this was a feasible shortcut, Warlock would have cut open a few 'expendables' and the Calamities would be fluent in every single Calernian language.

"But you can do it here safely," I pressed.

He eyed me amusedly, which was a pretty ghastly sight considering his glass eyes.

"For myself, I can rely on my aspect to handle the worst of the backlash," he noted. "I will have severe migraines for weeks or months before it has all been processed, but I have herbs to alleviate this."

"And me?" I said, already expecting the worst.

"*Human* minds were not meant to process that much knowledge instantly," he reminded me gently. "You have regularly employed powers beyond human capacity to understand, and indicted by the principle alienation that ensued. It will be no more unpleasant than when we employed absolute alignment together."

So a bunch of spikes through the forehead. Lovely.

"I'll cope," I sighed. "Work your magic, magic man."

"Must you call me that?" he asked.

"Be grateful Indrani's not here, or she'd start hinting about magic fingers," I replied without missing a beat.

She wouldn't even be wrong, to be honest. My time with Kilian had taught me that the jokes about mages having clever fingers were well founded.

"Silver lining," he muttered. "The attendants will do for our purposes, I suppose."

I glanced at the two young women.

"A question," I said. "Can you extract from the Trismegistus and the Bard?"

He nodded slowly.

"Broader, more complex minds will be more difficult to work with," he warned. "But in principle, yes. I must caution, however, that was is taken will be removed from the echo permanently. After the extraction, the actors will be... impaired, for lack of a better term."

"We'd be fucking with the imprint," I summarized.

"Fucking is not a term that applies to this subject," he sighed.

"It's a term with surprisingly broad applications, Zeze," I said righteously. "You should expand your horizons."

Huh, so he *could* glare with glass eyes without resorting to a light show. Nice to know. The work took too long. We were only halfway through the span of the shard, but the Bard was long gone and Trismegistus remained far from the other grievers for the rest of it. We used the time to get more comfortable with our sudden knowledge of Keteran. Or, as it was actually called, Ashkaran. After he broke the first attendant – a chunk of her face was now missing, like it'd been vaporized – and shoved a blue bubble into my forehead, I'd felt a rush. Like my mind was a cup being filled beyond capacity, until the cup shattered and Winter flooded my veins. It'd been... strangely pleasant. Like cracking your neck after a long day's work. Hierophant's own acquisition had seen him go still for a solid thirty heartbeats, and his face had been twitching in and out of a wince ever since. He admitted in a low voice that the aspect had not warded off backlash as much as he'd anticipated.

I would have spared him some sympathy but I was still busy wrestling with the fact that I had servant gossip a few millennia out of date rattling around the back of my mind. I was less interested in who had been sleeping with who in the royal kitchens, or the speculation that the... head household servant for halls and commoner rooms – there was no Lower Miezan word that carried the same breadth of implications – had been getting cheaper candles and pocketing the savings.

"You know," I said out loud, "for all those rumours about chambermaids being saucy this is surprisingly tame stuff. You hear filthier in taverns."

"Maybe the sort *you* frequent," Masego muttered. "There's a reason I refuse to go drinking with you and Archer. Last time I saw a rat."

I snorted. Yeah, maybe Dockside had been a bit much for Hierophant. He liked things clean, and that part of Laure was anything but. We split to see if there was anything interesting to dig up, and to my surprise there was. A surprising amount of information could be obtained from overhearing idle conversation, if there was enough of it. For one, I confirmed that the people with the copper circlets were royalty. Sons and daughters of the dead king, whose name had been Iakim. The oldest child was the heir to the kingship of Sephi-

rah, which I assumed to be the name of the ancient Keteran kingdom. The title of that heir, Zekiah, wasn't prince. Not exactly. The term was more like lesser king, and by the sound of it Zekiah had shared rule of the kingdom with his father for years now. Of Trismegistus, or whatever his true name was, I heard nothing. The nobles, or at least the man and women bearing titles I assumed to be something like nobility, among the crowd did not speak of him. Apart from the entombment, the favourite subject appeared to be the war with the 'People of the Wolf'.

Aside from the usual accusations of savagery and wickedness that always sprouted on both sides of any war, the rumour of cannibalism was often repeated. That and transforming into giant man-eating wolves, but I had my doubts about that one. I'd seen no hint of a power like it when passing through the battle shards. No one seems particularly worried about the war, though, not even after King Iakim's death. The People of the Wolf were apparently no match for walls of stone, and the 'Conclave' had finally agreed to enter the war. From context, those seemed to be mages. Had the lack of effectiveness of mages we'd seen so far come from the fact they were just amateurs? Could be. It wasn't what I'd come here to find out, though, so when the shard began again I found Masego and headed towards the upper alcoves where I knew the Dead King and the Bard would come to talk.

"Heard anything interesting?" I asked.

"Some blame the plague for the war," he told me, though he didn't sound all that interested. "They say it was the deaths in the outlying villages that attracted the wolfmen."

I cocked my head to the side. I'd chalk that one up for Hakram's tale of the fall of Keter.

"Is wolfmen how you'd translate it?" I said. "It struck me more as-"

"Ah, capitalized," he breathed out. "I see. Formal address, which would be spoken 'People of the Wolf'. Difficult to know which of us is correct without seeing the term written, of course."

"I can't read it," I told him. "The girl was illiterate."

"I have some semblance of the knowledge," Masego frowned, then winced as his headache flared. "I cut too narrowly, it seems. I cannot quite remember it."

I patted his shoulder.

"Don't get a migraine," I ordered. "I need you sharp for the important part."

We were both standing, when Trismegistus strode up the ramp and came to rest by a pillar. He looked calm, in the magelight, and did not visibly react when the Wandering Bard slipped through the darkness and plopped herself down in the alcove to his side. She put down the lute on her lap and chuckled.

"There's nothing quite like looking down at one's work, is there?" she said.

Her Ashkaran was flawless and without accent, as if she was a native speaker. Trismegistus did not look at her.

"Intercessor," he said. "I wondered if you would come."

"Intercessor," the Bard repeated amusedly. "Not the worst thing I've been called. Heard a thing or two, have you?"

The young man glanced at her, mildly curious, before returning his gaze to the ceremony unfolding below.

"You were companion to Nasseh the Great, when he fought for the submission of the twelve cities," Trismegistus idly said. "You were at Queen Sadassa's side as well, during the worst of the Wars of the Rat. Fortune and misfortune both draw you like carrion."

"And which do you think you are, I wonder?" the Bard mused. "So few of them even remember you exist, Neshamah. How horrified they would be, to learn what the prodigal son has wrought."

Neshamah, I thought, fingers clenching. I finally had a name.

"You come in the service of Those Above, then," the man said, and he sounded almost bored. "Tedious."

"Below has already blessed you quite enough, my friend," the Bard shrugged. "You don't need the nudge. But I'm not here to put sticks in your wheels, if that is your worry. Too late for that. Maybe if I'd had a few years to shape your opposition, but you played it well enough I had no openings. And I already burned my fingers tossing those bones with odds like this with the giants."

Neshamah finally turned to face her.

"You have my attention," he said. "If not intervention, what is your purpose here?"

"I suppose you could call it curiosity," she said. "I'm starting to understand how little I understand, you see. So I seek knowledge. About how they make people like you. I won't solve the riddle with the tools they gave me, so it seems I must learn craftsmanship of my own. Which takes me to you. You're not impossible, my friend, but you *are* unlikely. Your father did not look Below when he earned his Blessing. But you did, at an age where most children worry about the nature of supper. Was it your mother's death? Ugly affair all around, I've been told."

The man smiled.

"You think it kindness to offer me an excuse," Neshamah said. "But it is an insult, Intercessor. There is nothing in what I have wrought that deserves excusing."

"The plague alone killed hundreds," the Bard said. "That will grow to thousands, when the cities begin to be touched."

"And?" he patiently asked.

"Your people bleed for power," the Bard said. "But only ever themselves. You would break cities in the name a plan that will not bloom for years yet."

"I destroy flesh that will destroy itself in time," he said. "There is no theft in this, Intercessor. It is mere movement of the soul as was ordained, only now given proper purpose."

The Bard hummed, then pulled at her flask.

"The drow didn't teach you this," she decided. "The Twilight Sages conisder death the only sin, they would be appalled by what you speak of. Most tribes beyond the lakes can barely even use sorcery and their allegiances change with the seasons. Was it the Chitterers? I genuinely believe the Gods made them out of whatever was left after the rest of Creation was done. Shoddy craftsmanship, that lot."

"And still you believe I must have been taught," Neshamah said. "As if my actions were not the only lucid answer to the truth of this world. There are none closer in any lands to the Gods, Intercessor, so tell me this – why must we die at all? Why were we shaped with such inherent imperfection?"

"Because the Garden was a failure," the Bard easily replied. "Immortals always fall into closed circles. There are no answers to be had from them."

"You grasp too little and too much," the man said. "The Splendid are bound to repetition because they are feared, Intercessor. Because with the span of eternity before them, they might learn beyond what they were meant to learn were they not so tightly constrained. And so mortality is the answer to the deeper question: how do they loosen the bindings without birthing their own usurpers?"

Neshamah smiled, his golden brown eyes aglow.

"Why, by cursing their work with decay," he chuckled. "By ensuring the banner can only be carried for so long by any one soul before it is recalled at their feet."

"Below's favour comes with the end of aging," the Bard said.

"Blessing from it also calls the blessed to strife in all things," the man dismissed. "It is a curse of unmaking as certain as that of age."

"Yet you took a Blessing as well," she said. "And you've birthed no small amount of strife. The People of the Wolf, the southern cities, even your father – all dancing to your tune, every death another stone for your tower."

"Is this judgement I discern?" Neshamah drawled. "You must have been human once, Intercessor. Do you not recall the urgings of one's blood? I forced nothing. They do as they will, by their own choosing. All the forces of this war precede me. My forbear slew that of the Witch Queen, and so enmity was birthed between our peoples. Blessings of opposite bent set her against my father to the death, leading to the night of his passing. And war? Ah, war is but the accumulation of a thousand choices. Beyond the guiding hand of any single man. All I have done, Intercessor, was hitch my chariot to a falling star."

"Oh, I won't ever forget my first face," the Bard murmured. "Or the first few after that, when I evened the scales of the debt. I leave judgement to the Tribunal, my friend. To every force its purpose, and that is not mine."

"We must seem like golems to you," the man said wonderingly. "Our incantations written by the hands of Gods instead of men, yet not so different peering down from your perch. Eyeless things toiling for purpose we cannot understand."

"One day, maybe," she said. "When I will have grown used to dying. Until then I still weep for what we do to ourselves, without needing a single nudge."

"I have pondered, since I first learned of you," Neshamah said. "Whether or not your service is willing."

"They make us better, when we listen," the Bard said. "Even yours. It is a terrible thing you will do, but no less great for it."

"Yet you seek to escape your purpose," the man said.

"I have," she said lightly, "always loved a good story."

"What a clever jest," Neshamah mused. "That there are none to seek intercession for the Intercessor."

The Wandering Bard laughed. Like he was her friend, and not a monster who was scheming to destroy a kingdom and a half for his ambition. I shivered at the sight of it, for the second time. For reasons darker and deeper than the first.

"Pity, from *you*?" she said. "People never do cease to surprise me. I look forward to your ending, King of Death."

"O ye of little faith," the man who would be the Dead King smiled.

The Bard pulled at the flask again, saluting him jauntily, and sashayed away without another word. I did not follow her. She'd disappear, stepping into an alcove and vanishing into thin air. I stood there in silence for a very long time, watching the man that would become the Dead King look down at his father's burial. Masego, for once, sensed there was no place for conversation.

"Take us out," I said quietly.

"I have not extracted from either of them," Hierophant said hesitatingly.

"Tomorrow," I said. "We're done for the day."

"Catherine?" he asked, but it was more worry than question.

"Take us out, Masego," I said. "It looks like I need to prepare to fight an entirely different kind of war."

Chapter 31

Spectation

> "You're a masterful schemer, it's true. Let's see if that helps any in the alligator pit.."
>
> Dread Empress Malignant I, holding court

They all knew me well enough to leave me alone with my thoughts as I tried to get a handle on what I'd learned. Well, maybe not Diabolist, but she was better at picking up on those things than any of the others. I occupied my hands with mindless work, taking a whetstone to my sword even though it was quite sharp enough already. *In the grander scheme of things, Catherine, I'm the petty warlord of a backwater kingdom.* Black had told me that once, a long time ago. We'd been speaking about the gnomes, and he'd been putting in perspective the truth that a second-rate power in Calernia would be considered less than dust in the greater world beyond this continent. I was learning now that we were all pieces in a greater game even here. There was no other real way to understand the conversation between the two abominations, one still learning and the other emergent. The Bard had been considered old even in the days of Sephirah's fall. Gods, how long had she been around?

I did not consider myself all that inclined to fear my enemies, admittedly sometimes even when I should have. But as the whetstone slid against the edge, I admitted to myself that for the first time in ages I was genuinely afraid of an opponent. Heroes, even those who could tread all over me, I could cope with. There were ways around power, around the laws of the Heavens. They could be tricked and twisted. But something like the Wandering Bard? She might have set in motion the sequence of events that would lead to my death decades before I was even born. If Black was to be believed, she could not be killed and even if she somehow was anyway she'd only return with a different face. There was no telling what she knew or how she knew it. There was no telling where she was and what she was up to. How could an entity like that be beaten? The sharp song of stone on steel held no answers, soothing as it was.

I'd believed that I understood the game unfolding across Calernia. That I could guess, if not know, the motives and intents of the other players. The Tenth Crusade, the Empire and the League: the three powers on the board, as far as the nations of mankind went. My attempts at seeing through the Dead King were now revealed to have been little more than presumption, but light had been shed on more than that mistake alone. There was more going on behind the crusade than faith and ambition. Hasenbach might have refused my terms because of political considerations, as I'd previously believed, or she might have been moved by a whisper in her ear years ago that only now clicked into place. I could no longer trust any of the actors to act according to the rules I'd believed they obeyed, because I'd been blind to half the war even as I fought it. Which now took me to the very place I'd been struggling to avoid since I took the crown: I had to take measures to insure the survival of Callow while in the dark about the objectives of all the other forces in play.

Fuck, for all I knew the Bard was interceding in my favour. I'd had strokes of bad luck, sure, but exceedingly good one as well. I wasn't unaware that Black had been arranging things quietly in the background so that opportunities would land in my lap ever since I became his apprentice, but there were things beyond his ability to arrange. The Bard had been in the thick of it, at Liesse, when I gained back the aspect I lost and snatched a resurrection out of angelic hands. Had she been beaten there, or had that restoration been the purpose all along? Hells, had she pulled strings for me to win just so I'd fuck up with Akua the following year and Second Liesse got the Tenth Crusade going? I could go mad, trying to find the hand of the Wandering Bard behind every turning point of the last few years. But then could I really afford *not* to look for it? If I kept my eyes closed, I'd lose. Or whatever else she had in mind for me.

She'd admitted to the Dead King that he'd been too clever in his scheme for her to be able to crush him, but that'd been centuries and centuries ago. When she was still learning her Role. I had to face the possibility that even if I made all the right choices I might still end up broken because the Bard had shaped the choices I'd be able to make so she couldn't possibly lose. I felt shards of stone pass through my fingers, and noticed with a sigh that I'd crushed the whetstone without even meaning to. That was my only one, too, I'd have to borrow Hakram's from now on. I picked up my scabbard with a sigh and sheathed the longsword. So much for any of this calming me. There were no easy answers to be had. No plan to form out of thin air. Should we even finish the journey to Keter? I had a better notion of what I'd be letting out, now, and it was so much worse than I'd expected.

I would not have flinched at making a deal with a cunning undead Dread Emperor with a little more foresight, but Neshamah was something else. He'd been arranging the death of realms at a time where most the continent could barely use sorcery – and he'd had millennia to plot his next moves. I very much doubted that the man I'd seen would call it quits after breaking the Kingdom of Sephirah and conquering his hell. There would be more. And I had been

sent an envoy, I thought, because he had deemed I could be useful for that purpose. My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. I'd get nowhere, stewing in my own thoughts like this. The pot had been freshly steered, and I was too close to the matter regardless. I'd speak with the others after my head was cleared. Besides, for once under the restlessness I felt the call of exhaustion. Not physical, though. The boon of knowledge from Masego seemed to have tired me out mentally.

I dragged myself back to camp, waved away the concern of the others and crawled under the covers by the fireside. I'd still be just as fucked tomorrow, so forcing myself to go through the song and dance now did not appeal.

Sleep found me swiftly.

—

I woke to the sound of soft voice, after too short a rest. The orations and murmurs of the shard could not be heard, which meant our 'night' was in full swing. My mind still felt sluggish but at least I was no longer wandering from one idle thought to the next, treading the same hopeless circle. I kept my eyes closed and my breathing even, at first out of laziness but the reason was swift to change: the people speaking were Thief and Diabolist. Neither seemed aware I was now awake.

"- no longer need to sleep," Akua said. "You need not burden yourself, I can keep watch alone."

Thief chuckled.

"And you believe you're trusted enough for that, Sahelian?" she said. "I never took you for such a hopeful soul."

"To keep quiet in the face of danger would be utterly mindless treachery," Diabolist said. "I am, after all, dependent on Catherine to walk the world."

"Unless someone else takes the cloak," Vivienne said.

"I have use to the Woe," Akua said. "Use enough I was allowed this larger cage. There is no guarantee another bearer would have such purpose for me. A poor gamble to make."

"You seem to think you can talk your way into a semblance of trust, Wastelander," Thief snorted. "Best you discard that notion early. It will be less irritating for all involved."

"Fascinating," Diabolist murmured. "Your distaste of me has not ebbed in the slightest, and still here I am. Yet you've been charged with the duty of being Catherine's conscience, which means she would not have eased the leash without your permission."

"Her Majesty, to you," Thief bit out. "Sweet nothings and Praesi titles won't get you anywhere with us, Sahelian. We all remember what you are."

"Liesse," Akua mused. "The sum of all I am, in your eyes. You might not be wrong to think so. It was the pivot to who I am today."

"The greatest butcher of our time," Vivienne said.

"From a highborn, that would have been a compliment," Akua said, a smile in her voice. "Not so here, of course. I imagine that is how you've made peace

with the nature of the demand I be brutally snuffed out when my usefulness ends."

It was an effort not to stiffen. Named senses would have given me away to Vivienne for sure, though I wasn't sure how Diabolist functioned in that way.

"Not my call to make, that," Thief shrugged. "I'm the spymistress, not the queen."

"A poor parry," Diabolist chided. "You already know I suspect the inner workings of the Woe and your role within them. It would have been more effective to feign conflict between you and Catherine over the matter, allowing her to position herself as my salvation while you bayed for blood."

There was a long moment of silence.

"You're so caught up in your Praesi games you don't even see your blinders," Vivienne sighed, and she sounded fairly convincing to me. "Must be the old madness. You certainly don't sound like a woman who thinks she has a sword hanging over her head."

Akua laughed softly.

"My dear Thief," she said. "If I cannot carve a path to survival with such early forewarning, I *deserve* to be destroyed. That is the measure by which I am to be weighed. I've always found it amusing to hear your people speak of the Wasteland's ways as 'blinders', truth be told. As if bereft of them we would then see Creation as you do. Do you truly believe Callowans to be the only lucid people in the world?"

"My tutors taught me that's called a false equivalence," Vivienne said conversationally. "The pretence that the obvious failings in the customs of a people that slaughter each other and their neighbours for sport every other decade are somehow the same as the flaws in the customs of Callow. We're not perfect, of course. But I'd rather deal with the fucking elves than you and your fellows, Sahelian. The long-ears might be murderous assholes, but at least they stay in their forest. Your people make your problems everyone one else's problems too."

"So they *did* teach you rhetoric," Akua said. "Good, this would have been quite boring otherwise. You would have served as poor moral compass, were you unable to argue."

"There's that most sacred of villainous traditions at work," Thief said cuttingly. "Cutting one's losses and bailing from the fight."

"You speak as if you were not a villain yourself," Diabolist said.

"I am what I am," Vivienne shrugged. "Do you expect anguish and conflict out of me? I believe in the decisions that led me here. I would make them again. If all it takes to be estranged from the Heavens is refusing annihilation and submission, then I have no use for the Gods Above."

"You would be surprised," Akua said, "at the number of Empresses that spoke those very same words."

"You're trying to draw parallels," Thief said, growing irritated. "I don't know why, and frankly I don't care. Might be some old eastern monster was just like

me, though I very much doubt it. So what? There's no angle there for you to get mercy from me, Sahelian. Your little talk about redemption is absurd: there is nothing *redeemable* about what you did and what you are. Your execution has been stayed. That is as much of a victory as you will ever win, Diabolist. Look that truth in the eyes. Wallow in it. That fear is the least of what you are owed."

"The true nature of a woman," Akua said amusedly, "is only ever revealed after she has been prodded. It is an interesting circle, the Woe. Your role in it has been the hardest to grasp."

"Has it?" Vivienne said. "And to think they said you were clever. Lost a few feathers up there along with your heart, I see."

"Oh, you are the spymistress of the Kingdom of Callow," Diabolist dismissed. "It is no secret. But that is a function, not a role."

"Am I in for a story about how Praesi understand namelore so well?" Thief drawled. "Clearly, we should all take advice from the people who have been one stabbing away from brutal civil war from the moment their empire was first spawned. Please, magical wise spirit, share the secrets about continent-burning instability with me. I have so much to learn from you."

"Since you insist," Diabolist agreed with pleasure so perfect-sounding it just *had* to be fake. "The Deadhand is the least complicated. His people have been carefully pruned by the Tower into being a soldier caste for the Empire over a hundred reigns, and as the culmination of that edifice he serves as the right hand of a powerful warlord."

"Hakram is the least complicated of us," Vivienne said slowly. "Hakram. Your insights are truly far-reaching, Diabolist. Reaching in the wrong direction, sure, but that can't *possibly* be a first for you."

"I cast no aspersions on the man himself," Akua noted. "I merely state that his Name and Role are no deep secret. Hierophant, however, was an unexpected variable. Apprentices have transitioned into Names other than Warlock before, but usually when both are living simultaneously a succession through murder is the outcome."

"An awkward but kind and sweet man with no interest in power did not end up murdering his relatively loving father for said power," Thief said. "However will we solve this confounding mystery, Sahelian? I just don't know."

"There is no known precedent to his Name," Akua continued without missing a beat, and I was reluctantly impressed by her ability to just plow through that level of scathing sarcasm. "Consequently the core tenet of it had to be understood from the man himself. Fascinating as his upbringing was to study, the pivot seems to have occurred after he met Catherine. It was the calibre of the opposition that forged him, you see. Choirs and demigods. There was need for one who could understand and oppose those entities, and so the *Hierophant* came to be."

"You're forgetting demons and a highborn murderous witch with delusions of grandeur," Thief helpfully provided. "Admittedly the witch only ever seemed

good at killing innocents and spending her subordinates like copper at a fair, so she might not qualify as true *opposition*."

"The Archer did seem like an odd fit, at first," Diabolist mused. "No real fetters to Catherine's ideals or expectation of comradeship as shared inheritors to the legacy of the Calamities. Ranger, infamously, left the Calamities on the eve of the Conquest. And pupils of the Lady of Lake have a reputation for being incapable of playing nice with others, be they heroes or villains. It could not merely be the fighting that drew her – there is no lack of foes near Refuge."

"It's almost entertaining how much thought you're giving to the actions of a woman whose notion of a plan is dumping all her rations in a well and filling her bag with identical cheap booze flasks so she won't run dry," Vivienne said. "But by all means, tell me everything about the intricate considerations that are behind Indrani joining a band of people that allow her to drink, fight and sleep around as much as she wants. It ought to be enlightening."

Wait, was that why Archer never seemed to run out? Fucking Hells, I'd been wondering why she was being such a magpie about taking food from Masego's plate recently.

"Peers not in direct competition," Akua said. "That was what the Archer found. A luxury previously beyond her reach. And from her addition the Woe gained both an executioner and a field Named capable of independent action for long stretches, which they sorely needed. Hers is the thinnest bond by far, and I do not expect it to keep her bound past the end of the crusade."

"And that leaves me," Vivienne lightly said, though there was an edge beneath. "Don't disappoint now, sagely collar genie. What has your profound discernment taught you of my hidden nature? I'll go first: deep down, I always wanted to be a shoemaker. Shoes are the foundation on which rests civilization, Diabolist. We are literally barefoot without them. You ever think about that, in between ruminations about how you tried to conquer the world and got your heart ripped out instead? Food for thought."

"You were a late addition," the shade said. "And in some ways the most interesting. You were, after all, previously a heroine. I should have realized which the wind was blowing when she succeeding at turning one of Above's own, in retrospective. The weight on the scales had grown too uneven, for all my labours. But we were speaking of you, Vivienne Dartwick."

"Thief," the Callowan hissed. "There's only a few people that get to use that name. Don't ever count on being one of them."

"Thief indeed," Akua said. "Not, for all your skills, an assassin. That was what first drew my interest. Archer filled that purpose, to some extent, but you seemed a more apt candidate. Yet your knives did not grow bloody after your turning, nor your Name change to reflect it."

I heard Vivienne go still as stone. Diabolist had touched something there, though I didn't know what.

"Looking back, the void you filled seems more obvious," the shade mused. "You are Callowan. The only one of the Woe who shares Catherine's ideals to

any deep extent, as Adjutant would likely adapt without true challenge to a change in her priorities. After she seized Winter's mantle in full, you became the measuring stick. It was simplification to call you a moral compass, I will confess. You are not a particularly moral woman, Thief. But you do love your homeland, and have kept some of the qualms you were taught as a child. You are a restraint, and through your function as spymistress a provider of choices. In some ways, one might argue your perspective is the crucible through which Catherine remakes herself every time she is confronted with greater strife."

"You know," Vivienne said, "I used to wonder why you were playing the tamed hound nowadays. Oh, you're bound. That's part of it. But you have to know that all the playacting and sweet whispers you've been up to are not strictly necessary. Being useful and not actively offensive to everything we stand for would have gotten you this far anyway. But that last tirade of yours? It says a lot more about you than me. Because it's about Catherine more than me or the Woe. And it has to be, doesn't it Akua? Because you ended up in the box, and there has to be a reason for that. She has to be special in some way to have beaten you, otherwise you just *couldn't stand it*."

"I lost, my dear Thief, because I prepared for a battle against my rival and faced instead her power wielded by the Black Knight," Akua said softly. "The mistake in this was mine, and I do not deny it. And still, at the height of my wrath, I fought to a standstill a coalition of all Callowan arms of note and every Imperial army west of the Blessed Isle. Led by three Calamities and the full muster of the Woe. My fall was just, for every fall is just. But it would be a mistake to think *Liesse* is the origin of the laurels on her brow. That victory was hers alone in that she was the last woman standing."

"So you're trying to make her the Empress," Vivienne mused. "Because it's fine to have lost, if she was fated to climb the Tower all along. You were a necessary part of the story. You *mattered*. And who knows, maybe you'll manage to be Chancellor if you play the game well enough."

"She will climb the Tower, Thief," Diabolist said with iron certainty. "She cannot stomach any of the remaining claimants and will not suffer to leave Praes to its own devices. You speak of fate as some invisible force, but it is a simpler thing: fate is character. And it is in hers to cut deep into her bones for her ambitions."

Thief laughed.

"She's not in charge because she's been chosen, Sahelian," Vivienne said. "Gods, certainly not because she's chosen either. Or even because she has power, for that matter."

"Is it the power of love, then?" Akua said, a touch drily.

"There's plenty of people who care about Callow," Thief said. "And if I learned anything from the Woe, it's that caring doesn't fill granaries or run a court. She's certainly in the right place at the right time with the right amount of power to get things moving, but that's not really what matters. See, the thing is that she *acts*. Sometimes those actions are mistake, like going after the fae

and leaving you to plot under your rock in Liesse. But, most of the time, she improves things. Just by a little bit. And she draws other people who act with her. You think that's some unearthly trait, like she's some force of nature, but that's Wasteland talk. The Tower's the centre of the world for you, and the most important person in the world is the one that climbs it."

The other Callowan paused.

"Except she's not," Vivienne said. "The exemplar of whatever fucked up Praesi virtues you want to sing about, that is. She's kind of petty, her temper's foul and if Hakram hadn't stepped in she'd probably be a drunk. She ogles every pretty face that shows up even if they're our enemies, and she cannot for the life of her shut the Hells up even when she *really* needs to. She's not unique or irreplaceable, but even if you think otherwise that doesn't really matter – because she's part of something greater than her. She's just the rock that started the avalanche, Sahelian, and she did that by doing the most Callowan thing there is: after the invasion is done, you get up and get back to work. Others will come to help you, because a kingdom's people and not *banners*."

None of this was exactly singing my praises, but then that wasn't Vivienne's wheelhouse. She'd gotten the part that mattered, anyway. That we weren't supposed to stay in charge forever, that we were just a stopgap until Callow could handle itself on its own. The purpose wasn't to rule, it was to hammer away at Calernia until it was in a place where there was no need for someone like me.

"You think that'll make her Empress," she laughed. "You're thinking of her like some sort of tormented saint that'll take up the burden of keeping the lot of you in line for the greater good. You want to know what Praes is, for us? Another mess to clean up. Like the Tenth Crusade and the Dead King and the heroes. You're not owed anything. You're not different or unique, just another line on a long list. And that's your fate, Diabolist. That's your fucking *character*."

Akua stayed silent for a long time.

"It is a pretty world you speak of," she finally said. "We will see, in time, which one of us is right."

The silence spread again, and though I could not hear the shade move I suspected she was looking away.

"Good performance," Thief suddenly said. "But, Diabolist, if this is all of it I'm honestly disappointed. Was that really the whole ploy? I mean, Merciful Gods, you've used this one before. If this were a fairgrounds play I'd catcall and ask for my coppers back."

"Pardon me?" Akua said, voice painted with genuine surprise.

"Trust," Vivienne mused. "That's what fucks you every time. Like, for example, believing I'd be so ashamed about ordering you to rip your eye out repeatedly I'd never mention it to anyone. I did, Sahelian. And you know what she told me? That it makes no difference, if the same thing reforms repeatedly. Pain doesn't increase in the slightest."

"I don't follow," Diabolist said.

"You panted and you screamed," Thief said. "You pretended it hurt, because it made me feel like I'd accomplished something while you were actually getting your way. You 'lost' so I'd lower my guard. Like you did just now. Getting into an argument then throwing it, just so you'd be less of a threat in my eyes. Chastened little Akua, reconsidering her choices. Gods, you really are a snake."

"If I had done such a thing," Diabolist said, tone even. "What purpose would telling me you are aware serve?"

"I'm surprised you don't know," Vivienne Dartwick lightly said. "I get to see you pretend you're not furious. Sweet dreams, Sahelian. Our little chat's over until the next time you need your chain yanked."

Chapter 32

Kernel

> "Match the smile but watch the knife."
>
> Soninke saying

The precarious balance the Woe had struck travelling through the echoes together was gone. Within an hour of Masego going into the imprint and harvesting what he could from the Bard and the Dead King that much had been made plain. Thief kept close to Akua's shade, always in earshot, but had fallen into a sullen silence. Archer stabbed our most recent addition through the throat the very moment she attempted to strike conversation, laughing delightedly when the body reformed like mist after she withdrew the blade. I denied her suggestion that Diabolist be made to run ahead of the rest of us and used as target practice, though I was honestly tempted after what I'd overheard last night. There was no point in coddling a snake, true, but mistreating a dangerous and bound entity led to a particular kind of story and not one that ended well for any of us. Hierophant was still feeling the aftermath of stealing an entire language from Arcadia so he walked on his own regularly drinking from some herbal mixture he'd put together. Archer, thankfully, was leaving him alone. She had a talent for discerning between being a pest and being genuinely unpleasant.

That left only silence or Adjutant and I, for Diabolist to make conversation, and I got the impression that after so long in the box Akua was actually quite eager to talk with people. Which led to my finding out something quite interesting: Hakram made Diabolist uncomfortable. Not so much that it showed on her face, but I'd been looking at her closely and when conversing with my right hand she was just slightly off. There was no trace of the easy grace she'd used to run circles around Thief to be found, and while she didn't blunder either I suspected it was because she was being exceedingly careful. I was slightly amused by that, but mostly curious. She could have been faking, of course. That was always a possibility with Akua Sahelian, the footnote added to her every single action and behaviour. But I was pretty sure she wasn't, and that had me

thinking about the reasons she'd feel that way. Was she racist? It'd been my impression that by Trueblood standards she was actually pretty tolerant. Which translated to looking down on everyone not a Trueblood more or less equally, with maybe a dash of additional contempt added because greenskins were just so *uncivilized*.

Assuming it wasn't simply the spectacle of an orc being articulate and calm that had her on the back foot, there might be an angle there. Vivienne had her number in some ways and Archer was usually too willful to influence meaningfully, but Masego enjoyed talking magic with peers enough it could become an issue if left unchecked. It'd already led him to argue for the sparing of the woman who now ran the Observatory for him, and though I doubted he'd go on a similar limb for Diabolist of all people I couldn't dismiss the possibility he'd grow somewhat fond of her over time. There were similarities to the way they'd been raised. His only objections about mass murder tended to be either on a professional basis – human sacrifice was an amateur's crutch, he'd always argued – or because it would displease *me*. Considerate of him, but not exactly a solid foundation either way. It was a load off my shoulders that Adjutant looked like he'd be able to handle her. I'd long grown to rely on Hakram tidying it all up behind me, a pair of eyes that picked up on all the details I missed. It was fitting that it him who brought up the matter when we paused for a meal around noon.

"We'll need to change her appearance," Adjutant said, head inclining towards Diabolist. "A few people will see through it regardless, but it can't be openly known she is now in our employ."

"That would not be unwise," Akua agreed. "Your subjects have reason to be less than fond of me, and my presence would not help your reputation abroad."

Understatement of the decade, that. It would have been unproductive to maker her choke herself again, I reminded myself.

"I'm not sure how well glamour would work without something physical to be anchored on," I frowned. "I can weave illusions without one, but I do need to concentrate. It's not a long-term solution or even a reliable one."

"I have become part of your mantle, dear heart," Akua said with a pleasant smile. "Changing my looks through it should not be all that difficult."

I mulled on that. It was true that she was no longer just bound to the Mantle of Woe. I'd known that the moment I summoned her before beginning our journey. My influence over her shade had grown stronger, broader in scope than simple hold and release. I breathed out and focused, Winter slithering through my veins like whispering smoke. I looked her into the eyes, those brown orbs so dark they were nearly black, and... withdrew what made them. Or at least the thinnest surface of it. Akua blinked, eyes now completely white and without either iris or pupil. I swallowed a flinch. That'd been a little more than I was aiming for. Thief made her way to us, cocking her head to the side.

"Fae," she said. "Give her the appearance of a fae. You're known to have dealings with them, it's the most plausible story we have."

"And not," Akua mused, "entirely untrue. As all the finest lies are."

I was unsettled by the idea of moulding another person – even if their soul was all that was left – like clay, but I pushed that down. Diabolist was already almost inhumanly beautiful, the result of centuries of Wasteland highborn breeding, so twisting her into something fae-like was not as much effort as I'd thought. Larger eyes, the way most fae had, and coloured a vivid scarlet like the dresses she used to wear. Long dark hair, the tresses going down her back, and her already high cheekbones were shaped into a face that was just a little too long and finely boned to be human. I would have made her shorter, if only for the novelty of having someone not towering over me around, but I'd never met a fae that was short. Instead I elongated her, for lack of a better term.

"Fewer curves," Thief said, fixing me with a steady look.

I sneered back. I didn't ogle *all* my enemies. And despicable person or not, it would have been a deplorable waste to make Diabolist stick-thin. I did adjust her to her taller height, but left it at that.

"Pointed ears," Hakram suggested.

Difficult to mould, but not impossible. It still took longer than the rest of her face put together. I watched Diabolist as I did, for even a hint she was uncomfortable at what was taking place. People with good looks tended to be attached to them, in my experience, and more than that for Named most of all appearances mattered. There was a reason Black still looked in his early twenties and my hair had remained the same length since I became the Squire. Our perceptions of ourselves made us fixed points, to an extent, in one of the subtler rebellions against Above a villain was made of. But she remained indifferent. Like her face was no real importance. It might actually be, I finally decided. Akua was Praesi to the bone, and the highborn of the Wasteland saw everything as a tool – even their own appearances.

"I don't feel like I'm working with a set amount of clay here," I admitted uneasily after finishing. "I could make her tall as an ogre without trouble, and she certainly wasn't that large to begin with. Isn't there an original law about that? 'Something cannot be made of nothing'."

"It would not apply," Diabolist lightly said. "You draw on Winter as the substance of my being. One does not dry an ocean by removing a droplet from it."

That was less than reassuring, though her tone had seemingly been aiming for that. Thief assessed her with a frank gaze, the most practiced of us as disguising herself.

"It would pass muster, for most," she said. "The voice has to go, though. It's too recognizable."

"I'm not sure how to do that," I admitted. "She's a shade, so is she really speaking with her throat and chords?"

"It is a mere property, now," Akua said. "No different than colouring or height. Twisting it only requires the appropriate exertion of will."

Well that was just helpful of her, I thought drily. Unfortunately none of this had come with a manual so I spent almost half an hour struggling in vain before calling for Masego. He was irked at being called away from his almost-nap with a cool cloth on his forehead, but what was being done interested him enough the mood passed quickly. He held my metaphorical hand through the process and we'd made Diabolist's voice lower and throatier within moments. It would do, for now. I could have tinkered more, but the simple fact that I could *tinker* with someone's appearance was raising the hair on the back of my neck. That level of control was... No one should have that. Certainly not me. We got moving again afterwards: the centre of the shattered kingdom was close now, we could all feel it.

I doubted I would enjoy what I'd find there.

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Shard by shard, the fall of Sephirah was coming together. We spent most of a day journeying through plague-ridden cities and losing battles, watching desperation grown on the Sephiran side. I could understand why the nobles at the funeral had been dismissive of the chances of the People of the Wolf: though decked out in iron, their warriors were helpless before tall walls as most Sephiran cities boasted. They seemed more like a pack of raiding tribes than a true army, without siege weapons or any notion of supplies. If they could not ransack granaries, they went hungry. There'd been a mention of an organization of mages at the funeral, the Conclave, and Hierophant grew excited when he finally saw them in action. They were certainly a notch above the early practitioners we'd seen: the few Sephiran victories we saw had them playing a central role. Rituals seemed to be their specialty, nothing like the fireballs and lightning bolts that were the bread and butter of the Legions.

The boiled the ground under enemy soldiers, snatched the air out of their lungs and even drew storms towards the invading host. It was not, unfortunately, nearly enough. They were too few, less than two hundred, and not unmatched besides. The People of the Wolf were led by their Named queen, and she broke their rituals whenever she took the field. She had mages of her own, if few and seemingly all from the same tribe, and though they used little offensive sorcery they seemed to have a knack for calming and dispersing rituals. The sacking of a great city – for the times, anyway, it was barely the size of Dormer – was the turning point. There were piles of burning plague victims outside the walls, and when the invaders arrived they scaled the walls in the dark of night and slaughtered the beleaguered defenders. It got vicious after that, on both sides. The People of the Wolf began having a semblance of a baggage train from the sheer amount of plunder they were dragging along, which slowed them down, but their numbers kept swelling.

Repeated and richly rewarded victory had drawn more tribes to the war. That was my guess, anyway, because the warriors no longer all spoke the language that Hakram had told me shared root with Reitz. The dead king's eldest son wore the crown for some time, with one of his sisters as the lesser queen

sharing his reign, but we watched the Witch Queen feed him to wolves after she broke his army beneath city walls and captured him. That was when Neshamah began appearing along with the Conclave. Not often, but whenever he did the Sephiran mages always won the day. And their rituals were always a little more vicious every time. One battle where the defenders were particularly outnumbered led to the first use of necromancy we'd seen, the dead rising to make up the odds. It was far from the last instance we came across.

"Their manner of rule is not without merits," Akua said as we watched yet another coronation in the royal hall unfold beneath us from a balcony. "Though it would never function as intended in Praes."

The entire story was unfolding over what had to be at least a decade, I'd come to realize. Possibly more. The royals I'd first seen at the entombment were all growing older my more than a few years.

"It's not just primogeniture," I said. "The lesser king beneath the ruling one isn't always the next oldest in the family."

"They are the favourite or closest ally of the ruler, I suspect," Diabolist said. "The purpose behind the practice is quite clear regardless. The successor is allowed to entrench themselves in the court and kingdom so that any war of succession would result in their crushing victory. A cunning enough method to keep such matters stable in an era where they were anything but."

"We haven't seen them fighting each other yet," I agreed. "But they're going through kings like a basket of pastries. Not much entrenchment going on there."

"The Dead King is positioning himself," she smiled. "He is the youngest, yes? And was long gone from the kingdom. He must earn enough acclaim to be seen as the worthiest candidate for the lesser crown even though his ties to the others are weak. Once the succession reaches a sibling without sufficient support, they will inevitably appoint him beneath them to benefit from his repute."

I didn't reply immediately, eyeing my companion in silence instead. It was still jarring to hear the different voice and see the difference appearance, but that was a passing thing. No, what had be uncomfortable was how *easy* talking with Akua was. She was, well, surprisingly pleasant company. I could have done without the occasional endearments, but the more I spoke with her the more it became clear she wasn't a raving lunatic. I'd known that, of course. That she was just twisted in a way that couldn't be undone, not actively mad. But living with that truth in front of me was different than knowing it in this abstract. If she were not responsible for the single greatest loss of Callowan life since Dread Empress Triumphant, I might actually have caught myself liking her once in a while. It was made worse by her usefulness. Thief had been tutored as a noble's child, even if her father had lost his title after the Conquest, but like me she'd always felt more comfortable in the streets than sitting down at a writing desk. Diabolist had been raised as heiress to Wolof, and though

she was mother to half a dozen atrocities I could not deny she understood the halls of power in a way none of the Woe did.

Her words to Thief still echoed in my mind, sometimes. That she'd fought the better part of the armies of two nations to a standstill, led by eight Named. Her methods had been disgusting, and I would not forgive or forget them. But she had done it regardless, and cornered as I was by the Empress and the First Prince I could not deny there were things I could learn from the monster on my leash.

"He succeeded," I finally said. "We know that. But I'm not certain how. He's forging a reputation as the savior of the kingdom, but at some point he must have gotten the lesser crown or even the one above. If Sephirah kept losing even then, as it must have if they got desperate enough to resort to a Greater Breach, how did he remain king? A reputation like that has to be maintained or they'll turn on your twice as hard."

As it happened, I knew a thing or two about that. The Black Queen would only reign so long as she was not seen to bleed.

"You still think like a Callowan, dearest," Akua said. "Even before the Conquest, the kingdom of your birth had been a single entity with largely static borders for centuries. The loss of even outer provinces would have been felt a slight by all the rest. These Sephirans, however, are less than a century from the days of their unification. The royal army fights for the realm entire, certainly, but we have seen that the armies of their twelve cities are not willing to bleed for their sisters."

I frowned, following down the path she'd set out for me.

"It's all expendable," I finally said. "Except for Keter itself. That one city's all he really needs. The rest is willingly on the chopping block, because it allows him to accumulate power for his ritual without damaging his powerbase enough it unseats him. Merciless Gods. That's brutal even by Wasteland standards."

"Many usurpations of the Tower has been executed through Callowan swords," Akua said. "It is an old trick. Evidently older than I had believed. I will confess surprise, however, as to the Dead King's chosen method of ascension."

I flicked a glance at her.

"He's building up to a massive ritual by bleeding everyone else," I said. "That's the classic Praesi play, Akua. You can't crack open a history of the Empire without finding an instance."

She dismissed that with a graceful movement of the wrist.

"It matters, my dear, that his path to that ritual is so indirect," Diabolist said. "He did not usurp the crown, though opportunities must have abounded. The fullness of his influence seems to be his unspoken prominence among this Conclave and his popularity with the masses. He is not wielding his own might to seize authority, but instead relying on outside pressures to propel him to that desired summit."

I considered that. On one hand, he was using others as tools to place himself in power. On the other, those people weren't true accomplices. There was no plotting cabal backing him that we'd seen, and even his influence with the Conclave was odd. He was teaching them sorcery, that much was clear, and leading them to slowly dip their toe in darker waters. But he wasn't turning them into his own personal circle of sorcerers. Hierophant had been the one to first say the way necromancy was being introduced was odd, but Diabolist had agreed. Neshamah knew a lot more than he was teaching them, and what he *did* teach them didn't seem like he was offering a true education. *Even within the purview of necromancy there is a great deal of latitude in structure and variance*, Masego had said. *Some of those rituals are near completely unrelated.* I'd had a growing suspicion for a while that winning victories wasn't the point of the corpse-raising at all. And if the ends were unimportant, it was the means that mattered. And it could not be forgotten that beyond necromancy, there was another set of means at play – the scheme he was using to rise. Most notable in that it put a crown on his brow without conflict. Without breaking the mores of the Sephirans.

"He's not after the quickest or most effective way to rise," I said.

Akua's scarlet eyes turned to me.

"Then what *is* he after?" she asked.

"The one that leaves no openings," I grimly replied.

I ended our conversation there, without gracing her with an explanation. Akua Sahelian was not someone I ever intended on telling of what Masego and I had witnessed.

—

The centre of the maze was the birth of apocalypse. I'd known it was coming, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Keter's final hours. It was, I had to admit, a great city. Almost as large as Laure, which was astounding for a people that could not even forge iron. Tall walls of blocks of stone without mortar hid away most of the insides, though Indrani told us they were a pittance compared to the walls now encircling Keter. The capital of the Kingdom of Sephirah stood on a low plateau that formed a dais of sorts over the surrounding plains. There were abandoned mining pits scattered across it, and cobbled stone roads leading to four great gates of bronze facing the four directions. Copper shone in the dying afternoon last, covering the roofs of the great houses surrounding the central great tower looking down on the city, but none of us spared much thought for the beauty of it. The horror of the unfolding battle saw to that.

How many invaders were there? Easily over ten thousand, and not all of them from the People of the Wolf. Banners decorated with animal skulls and skins formed a sea beneath the walls, the host of what must have been half of what would become Procer assembled to take the last of the twelve cities of Sephirah. The invaders were dying in droves, but the city was slowly edging towards a loss. Sorcery crackled, weaving storms and raising the dead, but

the tribal mages tore through the spells and bestowed enchantments upon the assaulting warriors that allowed them to climb the walls without thought to their weight. We were witnessing the death of a nation, and in the sky above twilight was growing crimson.

We headed deeper in. That was where the gate out would be, I knew instinctively. Indrani threw a grappling hook over the walls and eagerly began to climb, but I drew on Winter instead and formed a narrow set of stairs that the others took even as she catcalled. Ghostly warriors of both sides dying around us, we ascended into the city. Fear hung in the streets, thick and lingering. Doors were barred, prayers and weeping sounding everywhere we tread.

"The Hall of the Dead," Archer said, pointing to the tall tower ahead after catching up. "What it's called now, anyway."

The city around the tower was deserted. All those beautiful mansions, and not a soul in sight. It was inside we found our ending. The chanting could be heard as we walked through the labyrinthine corridors, only growing louder as we got closer to the royal hall where we'd seen so many get crowned. Files of kneeling mages spread out from that centre like tentacles, each singing the same incantation in unison. There would be consequences to missing a step, we learned. One young girl mispronounced a syllable and let out a blood-curdling scream as her body withered, leaving a husk of a corpse behind.

"Fucking Hells," Indrani murmured.

"Workings this powerful leave little room for mistakes," Hierophant noted, eyeing the corpse with interest.

We reached the hall as the ritual neared its end, the chanting growing quicker. We'd seen this place before, many a time. A throne room richly decorated with banners of the twelve cities and statues of copper. There was no throne here today, nothing save for a tall sculpted arc of obsidian and the man standing before it. Neshamah was no longer young. He was closely-shaven and his hair was messy, and even now there was no trace of great Evil in him. No sunken eyes and horrid sneer: only calm, patient expectation. We advanced in silence until we could hear our own footsteps echo. Not a whisper to be heard. Then the Dead King spoke, and the shard ended. In the blank emptiness that enveloped us, we heard a woman's soft laughter.

My hand rose, the gate opened where the arc of obsidian had once stood and into Keter we went.

Chapter 33

Keter

> "And so Triumphant said: 'Tremble, for I am not yet content.'"
>
> Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

My boots scuffed the stone and a poisonously warm breeze caressed my face. I strode forward, leaving room for the others to pass behind me, and resisted the urge to drop my hand to my sword. Gods, this place was a nightmare. Though it was in the royal hall we had crossed, we'd evidently emerged outside the bounds of Keter. More precisely, on one of the four stone ramps leading into the city across the gaping maws of a chasm. It was dark for miles, down there, before flickering flames cast a light deep in the depths. The sound of the wind against the man-made cliffs was eerily akin to a dirge. I turned my eyes ahead instead of peering into the madness, but found only more of the same. Indrani had warned me that the walls of the Crown of the Dead were absurdly tall, but even then I had not expected the likes of what I saw. Jutting out of the sharp drop at the edge of the cliffs, the ramparts must have been at least a thirty yards high at the lowest point. No part of the city behind could be seen from out here, save for the spire of dark stone stretching out into the sky – and the orb of hellfire that hovered atop it, an indistinct silhouette shifting within.

This was not a city made for the living.

"Godsdamn," Archer said, letting out a whistle. "I know he's just a pile of scheming Evil bones, but you've got to respect his style. That's as doom-like as a fortress of doom gets."

"Drawbridges would have been more tactically sound," Adjutant said.

I glanced at him and found Hakram was unmoved by the sight of millennia of darkness and arrogance made into a city. In some undefinable way, it was so very much like him to take his first look at the Crown of the Dead and immediately start criticising its defensive layout. Any moment now he would mention that the artillery firing lanes could be improved by further overlap, or that the barbican was overly crenellated.

"I would wager that, to the likes of the Dead King, *every* bridge is a drawbridge if given sufficient attention," Diabolist spoke amusedly.

Ugh, Akua. She was not supposed to actually be kind of funny.

"Are we not meant to be honoured guests?" Hierophant said. "Making us stand outside his gates is poor manners."

Like *he* was one to talk about those. Still, as if magically summoned by Masego's complaining, our 'hosts' came out of the woodworks. From beyond the gate chilling howls were heard, and then the flap of great wings. Dozens of... not dragons, but perhaps the bastard child of them, took flight. Wyverns, though made of bone and leather with radiant red eyes. Each one as large as a house.

"Thief," I said. "The seal."

Vivienne flourished her wrist, palm becoming filled with the obsidian circle that had come along the Dead King's message. She tossed it at me, and though I snatched it out of the air without trouble I gave her a hard look. What if I hadn't been paying attention, and it'd tumbled off the edge of the bridge? How fucked would we have been, this deep in the Kingdom of the Dead without our proof of invitation? Regardless, the wyverns passed over us without trouble as I raised the seal above my head. The flock parted in both directions, diving below the stone bridge and passing under. With perfect timing, they came back up and landed simultaneously on the edge of both sides. The leathery wings folded back, and ahead of us the tall gates of steel began to open.

"An honour guard," Akua said. "How mannerly of him."

A show of force as well, though I didn't need for her to remind of that to be aware. Though I knew, objectively speaking, that the Dead King would not have invited us for the sole purpose of murdering strangers I could not quite manage indifference was we passed in front of the perfectly still wyverns. Their eyes, I felt, followed us wherever we went. It was a pittance compared to the welcome that awaited us beyond the gates. The closer we came, the greater the chill going up my spine. Indrani had told me everything Ranger had taught her about Keter, in particular the kinds of undead that dwelled within. There were, she'd said, three kinds. The Bones, the Binds and the Revenants. The Bones were undead as I knew them, raised corpses little more intelligent than dogs when left to their own purposes. Most were ancient enough they were nothing but skeletons wearing armour. The Dead King, Archer told me, could seize control of those at any time. The Binds were corpses with souls bound to them, as sapient as humans. They were the captains and servants of the Kingdom of the Dead. The third kind, the Revenants, were a breed apart. Named stolen from the grave, keeping a shadow of the power they'd once wielded while living.

The Dead King was a kind of his own, she'd added. Without equivalent or easy description.

What awaited us beyond the gates was an honour guard beyond the ability of mortals to assemble. The avenues of Keter were filled to the brim with silent dead, bearing arms and armour spanning centuries. Bronze helms in the an-

cient Baalite style, iron breastplates as were long borne by the Lycaonese and more than a few longswords of the distinctive Vale make of Callow. Banners from half the continent were stirred by the warm breeze, though none stood as tall as that of the Kingdom of the Dead: ten silver stars, set in a perfect circle around a pale crown. *By the regal crown you will know him*, the old verse went. *His horse is the death of men, his voice the fall of night and he strives doom unto all the world.* Villains drew epithets, myself among them, but none quite as many as the Dead King. We advanced, six of us surrounded by silence and blasphemy. The very instant was passed the threshold, thousands of dead kneeled in unison. I shivered. There had been a single mind at work behind it. In the avenue ahead of us, the dead parted to allow a pale man followed by six palanquins to pass through. I could hear his heartbeat and my eyes lingered on his approaching silhouette before my fingers clenched at the sight of the first palanquin.

Four dead carried it, but it was the drapery falling down the side that drew my attention. Black silk, embroidered with heraldry. A set of silver scales, balancing a crown and a sword. The sword weighed heavier. The words embroidered beneath I did not need to read. *He is not blind*, I thought. *He was never blind.* Whether the Dead King had imprisoners himself into his personal hell or not, he knew of the affairs of Calernia outside it. And in much greater depth than my worst predictions had anticipated. The pale-skinned man was the only living soul in sight, and memorable for reasons more than that. Raven tresses went down his back, his body perfectly proportioned as if he were more sculpture than man. He had, I thought as he came closer, warm and kind eyes. Given the surroundings, that only added to the horror of it. The stranger came before us and slowly knelt.

"In the name of the Crown, I greet you," he said in flawless Lower Miezan. "Black Queen, Tyrant of Callow, the King of Death extends his hospitality to your august presence and that of our attendants."

There was a slight accent to his voice, but not one I recognized.

"We accept this hospitality with the gratitude it is due," I replied. "Rise."

"I cannot, for my purpose is not yet discharged," the man said, pressing his head to the stone. "As gift of welcoming, the Crown bestows my existence upon you."

My lips thinned. Had I just been handed a slave? No, now was not the time to make a mess. If the Dead King knew enough of Calernian affairs to know the motto on my banner, he had to know how repulsive a Callowan would find slavery. Was this a test?

"The gift is accepted in the spirit it was given," I said. "Rise, now."

The man did so, gracefully.

"My face name is Athal, Great Majesty," he said. "I have been instructed to serve as your host for the duration of your stay."

"We have a guest-gift to offer the Dead King," I said calmly. "Though that can wait until audience is granted. Until then, we would see our quarters. It

has been a long journey."

"The Silent Palace has been prepared for your pleasure," Athal said, bowing low. "If you would deign to enter the palanquins, honoured ones?"

"Very civilized, not making us walk," Masego noted approvingly. "We should see about obtaining those in Laure."

I deigned, or at least began to. I paused when I finally took a closer look at the dead bearing my litter. No mere skeletons in armour, these. Their flesh was dead but well-preserved, their faces still human and their finery fit for royalty. Which they very well might be: crowns had been nailed to each of their heads.

"If it please you, Great Majesty," Athal said, coming at my side. "As a sign of respect, the Crown had put worthy souls to your service. You look upon-"

"Princes," I interrupted quietly, "Princes and princesses of Procer."

"That is so," the man agreed. "Prince Mateo Osuna of Aequitan and his twin sister Princess Nicoleda. Princess Clemente Milenan of Iserre. Prince Friedrich Hasenbach of Rhenia. Their tongues have been sown as penance, and crowns put to their brow as a reminder of the follies of arrogance."

They all came from principalities that had been pivotal in the war against Callow one way or another. At a guess Rozala Malanza's own bloodline was too young to the throne of Aequitan to have a representative, so they'd drawn from the one that ruled before it. Merciless Gods. The statement here was more alarming than the show of force surrounding us, in some ways. That Neshamah had hordes of dead was well known, but this was both a reminder that he'd broken more than a few princes in his time and that he knew *exactly* who my opponents were. The Dead King was making a point. I got on the palanquin in silence, and allowed dead royalty to carry me to the Silent Palace.

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The accommodations lived up to the name. We'd gone through the streets of Keter, passing a multitude of dead of all stripes, until we neared the infamous Hall of the Dead. I'd seen this district before, in the echoes. It had been where the powerful of Sephirah once lived in their copper-roofed mansions. Those were long gone, replaced instead by a circle of sprawling palaces surrounding the demon-tipped central tower. The Silent Palace was a strange wonder of architecture, six interlocked rings of different heights in marble black and white. Zombie had followed us with our affairs, though our personal packs had been taken by unsmiling dead, and the moment we entered the first hall white-robed servants knelt gracefully before seeing to all our bags. Every single one of them was alive, and no older than twenty. Athal followed me like a shadow, as I as watched the servants divest Zombie of her saddlebags I half-turned towards him.

"I did not think there would be so many living in Keter," I said.

The man had been both talkative and helpful, so far, and apparently genuinely believed I owned him now. Though the thought was repellent and there was *trap* written all over this 'gif't, I could at least hit him up for some low understanding of this place.

"We are none of us from Keter, Great Majesty," Athal said, bowing low. "All of us chose to become Hosts upon our coming of age, learning the trade of that choice. It is a rare thing for our service to be called upon, and a great honour."

My eyes narrowed.

"You were born in Hell," I said.

"A strange thing to call the Serenity, honoured one," the man murmured. "It is the world beyond our guardians that is most deserving of that ugly term."

"You've been outside the Kingdom of the Dead?" I asked, surprised.

"I have not. Yet we are not ignorant of the nightmare called Calernia, Great Majesty," Athal gently said. "The Journeymen return with the tales of their time in your brutish world every season, sacrificing their first life so that we may learn through them. It is a most noble duty. If not for my facility with languages, I may very well have chosen to serve as one of their number."

Hosts. Journeymen. *The Dead King is breeding people in his Hell for chosen tasks*, I realized with fresh horror. There'd always been rumours that he had human farms to swell his numbers with fresh dead somewhere in his hellscape, but I'd assumed it would be through regular reapings. *No*, I thought. *He has taught them it is an honour. Everything they know passes through his hands – by the time he's raised them up to the age of culling, they must actually volunteer.* I should have known better. The kind of man who'd plot the death of a kingdom and a half to obtain immortality with the Bard after his hide the whole time would not have made so elementary a mistake. He didn't treat his cattle like they were that. No, he'd tend to them lovingly and reap the benefits of that kindness again and again over the span of centuries. He must have shaped all their customs from the cradle, I thought. An entire realm turned to the sole purpose of strengthening him without forging heroes in the process.

"And these Journeymen," I said slowly. "They've told you of how the rest of the continent sees the Kingdom of the Dead?"

Athal seemed amused.

"Are we to put faith in the words of those that slaughter each other for sport?" he asked. "There is no war in the Serenity, Great Majesty. No murder or sickness or any of the brutalities outsiders inflict on each other. We are born and raised to the loving embrace of the Crown, and repay that kindness when our first lives have passed. It is the least of that which is due."

"And the devils?" I asked.

"Beasts of burden," Athal said, sounding surprised. "Save for those of the Writhing Palace, were none trespass."

That, I decided, did not sound like a place I ever wanted to visit.

"You're aware the Kingdom of the Dead has attacked other nations before," I tried.

"The Procerans," the dark-haired man agreed. "A warlike folk that have attempted to destroy the Serenity many a time, assembling coalitions of blind hatred. Are you not yourself come to Keter to seek help against their depredations, Great Majesty?"

Well, he had me there. I was also fully intending to throw the Dead King under the cart at the first opportunity, after carefully ensuring his leash was loosened but not loose, but that was best kept quiet. Assuming Neshama had not already deduced as much, which was looking increasingly likely. And still he had invited me. Why? I needed to figure out his game before meeting him, or I might just come out of that conversation having birthed an atrocity greater than Akua's Folly.

"So why is this place called the Silent Palace, anyway?" I said, changing the subject with all my usual elegance.

"It is so named for it had remained closed and untouched since its last and only guest," Athal explained. "You would know her as the Dread Empress Triumphant."

No 'may she never return', huh? I supposed this particular crowd had different ideas about the kind of person she'd been. I was a little unsettled at the very real possibility that the last person to sleep in the bed I'd end up in tonight was the worst monster to ever come out of Praes. Hopefully they'd changed the sheets since, because I wouldn't dismiss out of hand the possibility she'd gotten demon all over them during her stay.

"Any notion of when we'll be granted audience?" I asked him.

"If it please you, it has been said that tomorrow's dusk would be auspicious time," Athal replied.

"It pleases me," I said, a tad drily.

I regretted it immediately. It was unkind, to mock a man so obviously twisted even if the manner of it was fairly gentle. It sometimes occurred to me that I wouldn't like myself very much, if I met me as a stranger. That I'd ended up stabbing one of the doppelgangers in my soul seemed less and less a coincidence as I grew older.

"Then it shall be so, Great Majesty," the man bowed.

Zombie had been divested of her saddlebags and I allowed her to be guided away by a white-robed servant without protest. Odds were there was a stable in here somewhere, and it wasn't like I'd ever have a hard time finding her. The rest of the Woe had been led to their own chambers, save for Akua who'd denied her servant. She made her way towards me instead and my brow rose. I supposed she didn't really need rooms of her own, now that I thought about it, but she was in for a hard awakening if she thought she could haunt my own. Athal flinched when she approached and knelt at her feet.

"There's no need for that," I said slowly, crouching to help him back up.

"I mean no slight, Great Majesty," he said, still looking down. "It is simply that I have never hosted one of the Splendid before. I was not taught the proper manners."

"Splendid, am I?" Akua drawled. "Well, I've often thought so myself."

That might have amused me, if the man wasn't so obviously frightened.

"She's just an attendant," I reassured him. "No need to worry about her."

Diabolist's scarlet eyes flicked to the man and her face softened.

"You gave no offence, Host," she said. "And your manners, though not lacking, offered honours underserved. Treat me as any of the others and you will find your actions faultless."

Customary annotation: she was, of course, likely faking this. It was good to remind myself of that, lest my impression of her improve. Praesi highborn were not usually kind to servants, whenever they remembered their existence, and Akua Sahelia had sent people dearer to her than a stranger to their deaths without batting an eye.

"I heed your words, honoured one," Athal murmured.

"You needed something?" I asked flatly.

She folded her hand into her sleeves.

"Mere assurance over minor matters," she said, smiling at Athal. "I was told that our movements within Keter would not be restricted, save for the Hall of the Dead. Did the servant err in telling me this?"

"It is not so, Splendid," the dark-haired man said.

I eyed Akua curiously.

"The Lord Hierophant has expressed interest in sightseeing such a glorious city," she said.

Ah. Well, it wasn't like I'd brought Masego with the expectation that he'd be useful in the negotiations. He was here to ease our way through Arcadia, and as one of my larger cudgels in case things went south.

"Have Archer go with him," I ordered Akua. "And tell them to be back before nightfall."

I should not have to impose a curfew on a grown man and woman, but I most definitely *did* have to when it came to that pair. Indrani wasn't someone I'd usually consider or employ as a restraining influence, but she knew the dangers of the Keter better than any of us. She'd pull him away if his nose led him somewhere they shouldn't go. If wandering around kept them occupied while I prepared for tomorrow with the others, I'd count it a victory.

It was all about the standards, really.

"By your will, Black Queen," Diabolist smiled, bowing.

Lower than what Praesi court etiquette dictated, even if she considered me a ruling Dread Empress. She was being careful about maintaining the illusion of her change of appearance, which I couldn't help but approve of.

"All right, Athal," I sighed as she walked away. "Take me to my rooms."

"By your will, Great Majesty," he said, bowing as well.

I detected a hint of amusement in his voice. I could grow fond of that one, I decided. I allowed him to lead me deeper into the palace before clearing my throat.

"So, about those sheets," I began.

Chapter 34

Abyss

> "You could gather the stuff of all the Hells and still find less Evil within than lies in the soul of a single man. The worst monsters are always those that chose to be."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"So," I said, "before we get into it. What are the odds that Athal is our good friend the Hidden Horror wearing someone's face?"

I couldn't exactly say I suspected that because it was what I'd do – though if Masego was to be believed, I was technically wearing a people cloak courtesy of Winter at all times – but come on. Of course the friendly servant 'gifted' to me was going to be a trap. Sure, it was possible Neshamah considered himself above those kind of shell games. People who murdered kingdoms for power did tend to have very particular notions about their importance and what they would lower themselves to do. On the other hand, it was becoming painfully clear that we had no fucking idea what the Dead King was really up to.

"I find it unlikely," Akua said.

The Woe and the murderer – the one not part of the Woe, I supposed it was necessary to clarify – weren't nearly enough to fill out the absurdly large bedchamber that had been given to me. It was larger than the entire Rat's Nest had been, and furnished so richly if Robber had been around I might have considered looking away while he got sticky fingers. Pawning the stuff in Mercantis could have probably earned me enough to equip a few hundred legionaries.

"Possession would be difficult, if not outright impossible," Masego conceded. "Bespelling the man for control is a different matter. It is not impossible anything his senses come across will be extracted and sifted through afterwards."

"I hear one for mind control and soul cutting," I said, putting a jaunty tone to my rising horror. "Anyone else feeling like putting their silver at work?"

"I bet he put some kind of fucked up devil bug in the man's brain," Archer mused. "You know, one he can look through?"

"One reason I'm glad I don't really sleep anymore, straight into the pot," I added, openly sickened. "I'm waiting on the rest of the gallery for counteroffers."

"I'd be surprised if there weren't enchantments everywhere taking our conversations straight to the Dead King," Vivienne noted. "Athal himself might simply be a red herring."

My eyes flicked to Hierophant, who shrugged.

"There are no active wards I recognize, save those surrounding the city and the Hall of the Dead," he said. "Though everything in Keter seems touched by sorcery to an extent. The protections I set around us should be sufficient to prevent eavesdropping, or at least very difficult to breach without my awareness."

"Reasonable paranoia, making three," I sighed. "Hakram?"

"Negotiations in good faith," Adjutant said calmly.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Playing the long odds, I see," Akua said amusedly.

The orc's hand rose to still the incoming tide of responses.

"We assume it a matter of course the Dead King is intent on crossing us," he said. "I would ask you this, however: does he truly *need* to?"

"From an objective perspective?" I said. "Probably not. He can get what he wants out of us fair and square. That said, he's a villain. 'Need' takes a different shade when it comes to those."

"Yet we are not dealing with Diabolist, it's true," Vivienne slowly said.

I looked at Akua from the corner of my eye. She did not seem offended in the slightest. She might not even have been listening, scarlet eyes still thoughtfully considering Hakram.

"I do not advocate for blind trust, or even trust at all," Adjutant said. "But let us not dismiss the possibility of forthright dealings from the onset, either. Salting the grounds prematurely is not to our advantage."

"He'd bleed us all in a heartbeat, if it got him anything useful," I pointed out.

"Is this not a recurrent trait in all our allies?" Masego asked, bemused.

It was a little depressing that I couldn't really deny that.

"Point taken," I conceded, passing a hand through my hair. "Which neatly takes us to our next point of order. Today's lecture: what we want from the Dead King, why, and what we're willing to give in exchange."

Hierophant raised his hand. I eyed him darkly. Had he even ever sat in classroom?

"Yes, Masego," I said.

"Is this a mandatory lecture?" he politely asked.

Archer smothered her convulsive laughter into Hakram's shoulder, the wretch.

"Yes," I patiently said. "Yes it is."

The blind sorcerer looked a little miffed, but I pressed on before he could get it into his head to argue.

"For those of you who forgot, or weren't paying attention," I said, glancing pointedly at Indrani whose lips were still twitching, "Callow is about to have around eighty thousand Proceran and Levantines soldiers led by heroes invading through the Red Flower Vales. We need them, very badly, to be headed elsewhere instead."

"Arguable," Diabolist noted.

"Akua Sahelian, arguing that slaughter *is* the solution," I said. "We are all blindsided by this turn of events."

I bit my tongue afterwards then forced myself to look at the others in turn. We'd begun light-heartedly, and it was my own fault.

"I know levity is how we've kept our heads on straight," I quietly said. "As much as Named can have those, anyway. But this is serious. We're at a crossroads, and ahead are dead ends all around. The crusaders are in it to the hilt, and there's no compromise to be had with them. Callow's on the chopping block for the coming world order and we're out of allies and alternatives – except for the Dead King. This is the deep end. So please, let's act like the situation is as grim as it is."

That sobered the room. I didn't particularly enjoy doing it – it kept the pressure off my shoulders to treat it as laughable, even when we were all deadly serious. But I could not stomach making it a game even on the surface when things had gotten this undeniably bad.

"The Dead King is our counterweight," Adjutant said, breaking the silence and continuing my thoughts. "If he breaches Proceran borders up north, the armies at our gate will be either thinned or entirely recalled to deal with him."

I nodded my thanks to him.

"That said, we don't want him to actually take Procer," I said. "Aside from the horrifying loss of life that would entail, we'd be trading the hound at our door for a much larger tiger. So we need him to be enough of a threat the Tenth Crusade turns north, but not so strong the First Prince can't win. I believe that's possible to accomplish, for two reasons."

"The heroes," Akua said.

I nodded in agreement.

"The Heavens have already assembled their footsoldiers," I said. "They're on the field and spoiling for a fight. Crusades have reached Keter before, so we know the Dead King's not invincible when there's enough Named thrown at him. Baited out of the Kingdom of the Dead, he might be vulnerable in a way he isn't while in his seat of power. That'll draw them like carrion does flies. It's an objectively better victory for Above to get rid of Neshamah than to topple us – the folks upstairs will push for it."

"And our leverage," Vivienne finished.

"To our understanding, the Dead King is stuck in his 'Serenity' unless he's either attacked or invited out," I said, inclining my head towards her. "Our current working assumption is that we've been called here because we can pro-

vide that invitation and we've been judged sufficiently desperate to actually go through with it."

Which, in all fairness, we were. The only person in the room not already in on the plan to a full extent studied me intently before speaking up.

"You intend to add clauses to that invitation," Akua said, eyes hooded. "Not obvious ones from an outside perspective, lest the First Prince find them out and consider herself to have options other than war against the dead. Limitation of strength? No, without a full assessment of his forces that would be too risky. Ah. *Territorial boundaries*."

My fingers clenched. I knew there were few people out there who were both clever enough and knew me well enough to get to the conclusion so easily. It still worried me how little time it had taken Diabolist to see through me.

"Three principalities," I said. "Hannoven, Cleves and Hainaut. That would be the enforced limit of his invasion. Hannoven is fortified enough it will be hard to take, and as Klaus Papenheim's own territory it will strike bone with both the First Prince and her foremost general if it comes under siege. The other two principalities would give the Dead King foothold across the lakes, and so rally every Alamans of high birth in the Principate to the war. He's dangerous enough a neighbour with natural boundaries in the way."

"Preferably, we would want those principalities empty of civilians when the Kingdom of the Dead advances," Hakram said. "Their armies retreating as well, to strike back in strength when reinforced by the crusader hosts. Once war erupts up north, the balance of power of the Tenth Crusade shifts enough we have room to manoeuver."

"Sounds like a clever piece of diplomacy," Indrani shrugged. "But you're not dealing with some prick of a prince, Cat. You sure the Hidden Horror is going to be willing to put ink to that deal? To put *oath* to it?"

"Our game's crooked," I admitted frankly. "But as far as we know, it's also the only game in town. He'd make appreciable gains through this deal, even if he went in expecting us to betray him. It's not the finest offer he'll ever get, but it's the one on the table. And if he wanted to stay behind his walls, well, he wouldn't have sent an envoy in the first place."

Akua stirred.

"A warning, if you would," she said.

I glanced at her and nodded.

"All of this rests on uncertain foundations," Diabolist said. "Namely, that invitation his needed for him to escape his Hell. This is speculation, not established fact."

"I'm aware," I bluntly said.

"Then follow the thought to its logical conclusion," Akua said. "If no invitation is needed and he still sent an envoy to you, what is the Dead King truly after?"

"We're going into guesswork," I noted. "And blind guesswork, at that."

"If you try to ascertain objectives purely from his perspective, yes," Diabolist said. "But that is not the full sum of the information we have. He sent for *you*, specifically. You are not the first cornered villain, Catherine. Yet you warranted an envoy where others did not. We can garner some knowledge from studying what sets you apart from other villains."

I met her gaze, unblinking.

"And what would that be?" I said.

"Two facts seem most important," Akua said. "First, you are now the crowned and recognized head of a traditionally Good kingdom. Ensuring you remain in power might represent a chance to tip the scales of the Game of the Gods on Calernia."

There was a cheerful thought. The Pilgrim had bought into the notion, anyway, so there might be something there. We had no indication that the Dead King's game relied on the balance of power, however, so the grounds were shaky.

"And second?" I asked.

"You are Queen of Winter in all but name," Diabolist said. "Fae are sworn to you. You are capable of granting titles and assembling a court."

Adjutant's brow creased.

"Titles," Hakram gravelled. "It's about the titles, if Winter is relevant at all. If you start handing them out, our potential strength escalates faster than anyone else can match. All the heroes capable of fighting are already out there, and the crusade still hasn't broken through. The Heavens are currently winning, but not by wide enough a margin to hold up. They would have to put a full hand to the scales to compensate, and if they do..."

"Below gets to do the same," Vivienne quietly said. "It'd start a vicious circle. The Heavens push again, Below matches, and all the while the fire spreads. Winter's the match to tinder. If Arcadia really was the sketch for Creation, then bringing Winter into this is like stealing the pieces of an earlier match to play in the most recent game."

"I haven't been granting anyone titles," I flatly said. "Precisely to avoid this kind of complication."

"If you did, however," Akua said. "What entity is arguably the most powerful on the side of Evil?"

We all knew the answer to that. An argument might have been made for Praes, back in Triumphant's day, but that era had passed.

"So if it all goes up in flames, he's likely to be involved when Below makes its play," I completed grimly. "He'd want to put his finger to the pulse before it comes to that, and have assurances in place for when the arrows start flying."

"Indeed," Diabolist smiled pleasantly. "Which is quite the interesting development, don't you think? Whatever the truth of his intent, we have something that is desired. What we succeed at making of that is all that matters."

Gods forgive me but in that moment, even after all she'd done, I was glad she was out of the box.

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The white-robed servants came to help us prepare for the audience several hours before twilight, but I dismissed mine. Hakram was quite enough for me. It was soothing, to have him help me into my armour. A ritual just for the two of us. The carapace of steel grew steadily around me, until all that was left to add was the cloak around my shoulders and the crowned helmet that had already needed reforging several times. I only put them on after the others were readied, the Woe in the fullness of their regalia. There was sense of solemnity to it. Archer's ceremonial garments were not significantly different from her usual, merely trading her usual leathers and silver mail for ones we'd had tailored for her in Laure, but it was oddly nostalgic to see her with the face covered by a hood and scarf again. Hierophant was all flowing black robes and silken eye cloth, somehow turning the simplicity of it into a statement of might. Adjutant and I were steel from head to toe, a frank admission of the nature of what we wrought. It was Thief that was barely recognizable. Her short hair had been styled and coiffed, going from haphazard to carefully arranged, and her prowling leathers were traded for Callowan court garb: a dark green overcoat bordered in brocade, over a long high-necked white tunic going to her knees. Soft and well-polished boots went up to her calves, with only a simple sheathed knife at her hip serving as a reminder of her Name. Diabolist remained as I had made her, somehow wearing her ghostly garments as if she'd been born to them.

Athal was our guide to the Hall of the Dead, along with several others Hosts. The pale man was subdued today. Not cowed, but well aware of the gravity of his duties. It was not often one was granted audience with the Hidden Horror. The inside of the spire was not as I remembered from the shards, everything within having shifted. Dimly, I could trace the pattern of our journey in my head. It all revolved around the royal hall now. The heart of the tower, where the portal and the man who'd made it awaited us. The antechamber to that hallowed place seemed filled with statues, at first glance, but a second revealed otherwise. The fifty silhouettes standing still were not stone or the remembrance of kings.

"Revenants," Archer said, and none of us replied.

Heroes, I thought. *Dead heroes, and perhaps villains as well.* Ripped out of whatever ancient age they had fallen, still garbed in the armaments of their defeat. Men and women of every stripes, knights and sages and wizards. An honour guard that none but the Dead King could boast. We passed them by in uneasy silence. Athal bowed low as we stood before the bronze gates of the hall.

"We part ways here, Great Majesty," he said. "What lies within is not for the likes of me. May you find all that you seek, and leave a friend to the Serenity."

I nodded at him, then took a deep breath. A memory flicked back to the front of my mind, quick and silver-bright. Too clear for a mortal mind. A thumb running up my cheek as the lesser god smiled

"You are in need of a reminder, Catherine Foundling, of the difference between bravery and ignorance," I murmured to myself, with a bitter smile.

Another king, that one, that I had only ever beaten on his own terms. Something to keep in mind when facing the king ahead.

The bronze gates opened, and we went forward to meet with the King of Death.

"Her Majesty Queen Catherine Foundling, Tyrant of Callow, Sovereign of Moonless Night, the Black Queen."

The announcement rang loud and clear in the hall as I advanced, coming from a dead man's throat. The others were announced behind me. *Lord Hierophant, Lord Adjutant, Lady Archer, Lady Thief. The Shade of Splendour.* The words washed over me, made faraway by what I witnessed. No portal there, not today. A tall dais with a throne of bones, with a long table set before it. From the tall rafters hung banners from all the great hosts of Calernia. Old and faded. Some still keeking of blood long turned to dust. Yet the greatest of all banners hung behind the throne, the deep purple of the Kingdom of the Dead's heraldry set with crown and stars. None of it mattered, compared to the thing that sat the throne. It was a man, or perhaps just the mockery of one. Not living yet not dead, so thin bones could be made out through the parchment-thin skin. Pale locks of hair tumbled down messily, reaching down to the elaborate purple robes decorated with gold chains and riotous jewels that together twice earned a mortal king's ransom. The thing was sprawled lazily, the ancient crown of Sephirah on its brow, watching us with sunken yellow eyes. A curtain of power hung between us and it, unseen but thick against the roof of my mouth. *Illusion*. The Dead King was not within the hall. It was not Neshamah's body I was seeing, either. Not his first one anyway.

"I greet you, Black Queen," the abomination said in a rippling voice. "And confirm by my own tongue extension of hospitality to you and yours."

I bowed my head.

"We are duly grateful of the offered courtesy, Your Majesty," I replied. "And offer guest-gift as a sign of our own."

Hakram strode forward, face serene. It had been trouble, finding something that was a worthy gift yet easy to carry through Arcadia. So many of the things that would have pleased the monster would have been dangerous to us. In the end, it'd been Ratface that came through. He knew people that know some people in Mercantis, and for a cost that made me wince they'd nabbed something of worth from an auction. Adjutant removed the silken veil from the cushion he carried, revealing a small shard of black stone.

"A piece of the Tower as it once stood, before twice being cast down," Hakram announced.

A white-robed attendant, this one without a heartbeat, came forward to take the cushion from his hands. It was offered to the Dead King, who took it in hand and studied it with a thin-lipped smile.

"A sliver of greatness," he said. "And a reminder of frailty. A worthy gift, Black Queen."

I bowed my head in silence. He set the stone back down on the cushion, and it was spirited away by the servant as he returned those wicked yellow eyes to us.

"Sit," the Dead King invited. "You are my guests, after all. It would not do for you to remain standing. Would you partake of my table?"

"We would be honoured to do so," I lied.

"I am pleased to hear it," the thing that had once been Neshamah said. "We have much to speak of, and it would make me uneasy to do so while your throats are dry."

I forced a smile.

"I confess," I said, "that your invitation roused great curiosity in me. Talk is much welcome."

"And yet you wonder, what are we to speak of?" the abomination chuckled. "Allow me to shed light."

Yellow eyes met mine.

"We must speak of that most ancient trade of kings, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "*War*."

Chapter 35

Stroll

> "Seventeen: always agree when offered to share in the rule of the world by a villain. The three to four heartbeats of sheer surprise that will earn you are a golden opportunity to kill them before it comes to a monologue."
>
> 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

The Dead King kept a good table, for a corpse.

It was a little surreal that after that last bit of dramatics we were expected to have a meal, but wasn't that diplomacy? Vivid theatre, followed by long stretches of tediousness. There were half a dozen kind of spiced meats on the table I didn't recognized but tasted delicious, with the only dark mark on the affair that it was apparently expected that undead attendants would cut my meal for me. I dug in with reluctant enthusiasm, since it was unlikely I'd get to eat this fine a meal for months yet. The cooks at the palace had been weaned off the more complicated fare they'd learned from Mazus and the Fairfaxes and gently guided into making the simpler fare I liked better – if it used to squawk and had since been roasted, odds were I'd enjoy it – but they seemed to have taken that as a challenge to put all their efforts into dessert. Which, well, I had not found it in myself to deny. Masego had a sweet tooth as well, and blueberry tarts were one of the few plates that were never at risk of coming back full when sent into the Observatory. I laid off the wine, though out of politeness I took a few sips. It still tasted like ash to me, as all lesser spirits had since I fully claimed my mantle. Setting down the silvers, I politely dabbed away the bit of sauce on my lips with the provided cloth and leaned back into my seat. Meal time with the Woe tended to be a riotous affair, but not today.

Trading barbs with the Dead King as audience would have been a little too much even for Archer. The abomination sitting the throne waited patiently, by all appearances pleased with how quick we'd been to dig in. I caught his eye, purely by happenstance, and when I faced those yellow orbs the throne room went dark. Sighing, I put down the cloth.

It'd been about time for something to go wrong, hadn't it?

A quick look around told me I was no longer sitting in the throne room. This was the pitch black of nothingness, not deep shadow. The cloth had disappeared into the dark the moment it left my fingers, and the table had followed suit the moment I took my eyes off of it. The only visible thing around was a standing man, and my brow rose when I took him in. The throne-sitting corpse had not been the Neshamah of millennia ago. This, however, was. Pale and mess-haired, with those thick eyebrows and calloused hands. Closely-shaven as he had been when I'd last glimpsed him, a heartbeat before he wrought the doom of Keter.

"There is no need for alarm," the Dead King spoke in Ashkaran.

I forced a frown in my face.

"I'm afraid you've lost me," I said.

No amusement bloomed on his face. He did not strike me as offended by the lie, either – if he even knew it was one. What had been spoken was simply put away behind those golden-brown eyes, to be studied at his leisure.

"My apologies, then," he replied in Lower Miezan. "Would you walk with me, Black Queen?"

I rose to my feet, swallowing a snort when the greatest abomination ever born to Calernia chivalrously offered me his arm. *In for a copper*, I mused. I looped my arm into his and allowed him to lead me through the nothingness.

"I judged a private conversation to be in order, before negotiations began," the Dead King said. "As reparations for the imposition, the least I can offer is an interesting sight to accompany it."

The darkness bled out. It was like watching a painting in reverse, I thought. Instead of splashed of colour being put to canvas, strokes of black were removed and bared the sights beneath. He'd not lied, at least, about it being *interesting*. The two of us stood dozens of miles in the air, watching the slaughter that took place below. It was a siege, or at least an assault part of one. Surrounding a Keter near identical to the one I'd seen in Creation, hundreds of thousands gathered beneath colourful banners to take a run at the walls. My eyes lingered on the few heraldries I recognized. Most of them Proceran, but a few Callowan ones as well. The bells of House Fairfax startled a finger clenching out of me. That banner had not flown in the wind since the Conquest.

"Sixth or Seventh?" I asked.

There could be no doubt, after all, that it was a crusade beneath me.

"Sixth," Neshamah replied. "The depths of that failure led to the birth of the Seventh, in many ways. The Choir of Contrition is hard of learning."

"My own encounters have left me less than fond," I said. "The first hero I fought was sworn to them."

"The Lone Swordsman," the Dead King drawled. "Ah, those pesky Hashmallim. All those centuries and they still believe the right sword in the right hands can accomplish anything. Their string of failures had made them increasingly heavy-handed. Mercy is the the Choir to watch, for subtlety."

"And Judgement?" I probed.

"That sword only ever clears the scabbard when something needs to die," the abomination smiled. "No coincidence, that the current White Knight is one of theirs. The Heavens have pressing need of blood on the ground, and the man will serve to herd the others towards the fated abattoir."

"They can be beaten," I said, watching a wooden ramp collapse under stone thrown from the walls.

Hundreds fell to their screaming deaths in the pit below.

"In a manner of speaking," the Dead King said. "Praesi have slain and tricked them into falling, as have I. Yet the Choirs stand, for their existence is fixed. A dead angel does not detract from the whole. It remains as it ever was."

"They have to play by the rules," I said.

"Oh yes," Neshamah murmured. "And they will pay for that, in time. That delightful child in Helike wove a trap for them right under the Intercessor's nose. I expect the end of that play to be nothing less than *magnificent*."

The Tyrant, he meant. I forced myself not to stiffen. I'd expected him to take a swing soon, either a Procer or whatever nation was limping heaviest at the time. This was a hint there was another game afoot, though. And I doubted it had been offered lightly.

"He's offered me eternal friendship," I said, hoping to shake a little more loose.

The abomination grinned.

"To me as well," he said. "And the rats, though they ate his envoy. I confess I quite enjoy his sense of humour."

The Tyrant of Helike was mad, this was well-known. I was starting to wonder if it was perhaps *too* well-known. Behaviour could seem erratic without actually being so, when you failed to grasp what someone was truly after.

"But I digress," the Dead King dismissed. "We did not take this stroll to speak of the League of Free Cities. It appears we have a common foe, Black Queen."

"Procer," I said. "I would have preferred not to fight them at all, but Hasenbach left me little choice."

"She is an interesting one, their First Prince," Neshamah said. "A shame that her understanding of what a crusade is was so lacking, but it is too late to leave the saddle once the lion is ridden. She must follow through or break the Principate for a few generations."

"A matter of some interest to you, I imagine," I said.

"Come now, my young friend," the Dead King laughed. "Do you take me for such a fool I would want the Principate to *fall*?"

"Without Procer there's little left to contain you," I pointed out. "The Dominion and the League might manage to salvage parts of the south and Callow would hold the passes to the east, but you'd be trading a single mighty opponent for several weaker ones."

"I could bring ruin to them," the Dead King mildly said. "Drown the Lycaonese in death, devour every field and city from the Tomb to Salia. I could have done this when they were grown fragile from their war of succession, and none would have been able to stand against me. Yet I did not."

"Because it'd have hung a sword over your head," I said.

"Not immediately," Neshamah mused. "They would have allowed me to glory in it for some time. Lovingly tended to my legend, my thousands years of darkness – or, more likely, my few centuries. They would have been willing to pay that price twice over, to have me bare my neck."

"And yet here I am," I said. "Invited to speak of war. Because there'd be two heads but only one sword. It's how you survived Triumphant, isn't it?"

"She was a great woman," the Dead King fondly said. "There was a *clarity* to her that I'd never seen the likes of. But you misunderstand my intent. I do not seek to use you. My war on stillness will not be waged in so half-hearted a manner. This is merely a welcome, Catherine Foundling."

"To what?" I asked.

"That most rarefied of societies," he laughed. "We few immortals."

"I can die," I flatly said.

"So can I," the Dead King said. "So can she. And there have been others before, who came close yet passed in the end. But I have great hopes for you, Black Queen. You have crawled through the cracks in a most fascinating way – never before have I seen anyone reach apotheosis by *accident*."

I bit my tongue before I could deny him. He was wrong. Had to be. I'd carved away at myself piece by piece and put a mantle over the remains, but I was hardly a god. Even a lesser one. If that delusion made him civil and open to negotiation, however, he could keep it.

"She," I said instead. "The Wandering Bard."

"The Name changes," he said. "The faces as well, swift as seasons. The Role has not. Intercessor she was and will remain."

"She's got her hands all over this war," I said. "She was in Callow, before it all went to shit. In the League too, before the shockwaves of that rippled across the continent. I know better than to believe she won't pop out again."

"She encountered a nasty little setback in the south," Neshamah said. "And has remained... discreet, since. But do not believe her absent because she is not before your eyes. She has as many irons as there are fires."

I bit my lip. Should I? It was a risk. But when would I ever have an occasion like this again to speak with one of the few entities that might have a decent grasp of her? The Wandering Bard was a shadow cast on everything I had been trying to accomplish.

"What is she after?" I asked. "I used to think it was destroying what was made of Praes, but this is too much. Too large. She didn't need a crusade to accomplish that."

"I thought I understood her, once," the Dead King pensively said. "Then she ruined me with a smile on her lips. A dozen times again did the two of us dance

that dance, and yet even now she remains inscrutable in her intent. Know her to be your foe, and that in this game of ours there is nothing more dangerous than allowing the others to grasp your heart's desire."

"But I should trust you," I said. "Because Evil is one big happy family, give or take the occasional knife in the back."

He laughed.

"Never trust me," he advised. "Or anyone else. Those are the last remnants of who you once were seeking to shackle you. You will betray me, if we make bargain. Or I will betray you. That is the nature of things."

His arm left mine and he smiled gently.

"I need you to understand, Catherine, that none of it should be taken a slight," Neshamah told me. "That even if you wound me most grievously, there is nothing to bar you from seeking me out for alliance in centuries to come. That if rip out the heart of you, it is not a declaration of war: it is simply a single tide in a very old sea, and in time it will pass. All things do, in the end. Save for us."

"You do not sound like a man who wants to make an alliance," I said.

"Yet I will listen to your offers, and accept them should they suit," the Dead King said. "I am in no hurry. Neither are you, though you have yet to grasp that truth."

He patted my hands affectionately.

"You are about to begin a journey, Catherine Foundling. They will hound you," Neshamah said, "to the ends of Creation. No matter where you flee, no matter how you plead and bargain and reason. They will scour the impurities from you until all that is left is the devil they feared all along. And when you rise from that grave of ash, crawling through blood and smoke?"

He smiled.

"I will be waiting on the other side."

I swallowed, though my mouth was dry.

"The day is yet young," the Hidden Horror said, looking down at the slaughter that once took place beneath his walls. "Let us return, and speak of earthly treaties."

A drop of darkness touched the world, and like ink in water is spread. It was mere moments, before I sat before the table again. The meat on my plate was still warm.

My hands were trembling, and I could not bring myself to believe it was not warranted.

—

I watched moonlight wash over the Crown of the Dead in silence. We'd spoken with the Dead King for more than an hour after the meal was finished, but I'd been unable to concentrate as much as I should. Hakram had done most of the talking, presenting our offer and terms of alliance. Nothing I hadn't known before. I'd provide the invitation out of his Hell, in exchange for limits on how much he could swallow. No promises of assistance in the defence of Callow

required, none offered in his battles against the Tenth Crusade – though I'd left the door open for further dealings there. I did not intend to ever cross that threshold, but the pretence that I might should be enticement in its own way. Neshamah was, after all, preying on my desperation. He would suck that teat try if he could. No accord had been reached. The Hidden Horror told us the offer was worth considering, and that he would do so with due diligence. We were to meet again tomorrow at twilight, for further discussion of the proposed treaties. It was not a refusal, at least. I suspected that if the Dead King had been uninterested in the terms he would have made that clear without stringing us along, but that was just a feeling. As Akua had pointed out afterwards, the longer we remained in Keter the better his bargaining position became.

If we stayed here long enough, there'd be no time for further preparation of Callow.

That should have weighed on me. The possibility that this dark gambit would come to nothing, and I'd walk from Keter with nothing to show for it. But it wasn't what my mind was lingering on. To him, all the treaties in the world were nothing but play-acting. I'd gotten a glimpse of what Neshamah believed Creation was, and it was nothing that a makeshift bargain could truly change. The kingdoms, the armies, the borders – they were just ink on maps. The Pilgrim was willing to let Callow burn if it meant the Grand Alliance turned its swords to the Kingdom of the Dead, but the abomination had never once been worried about that. Gods, he didn't even need to *fight* them did he? He could just wait them out. Let the petty feuds of mortals tear apart that ambitious edifice. A century or two of keeping to his borders meant nothing to a creature like that. As long as the Serenity kept churning out soldiers, kept growing within the hellscape, he would pull further ahead. *Because his realm doesn't fight itself, while Calernia is a tinder box no matter the era.* And that was the entity I meant to use for my purposes. It scared me, that he'd outright said he wouldn't much care if I did. Because it meant that all of this was a passing distraction to him. Nothing that really mattered.

The flare of the match drove back the dark, for a moment, until I flicked it away. The wakeleaf in my pipe brought a sharp taste to my mouth when I inhaled, pouring away when I spat out a stream of smoke. The highest ring of the Silent Palace offered a beautiful view of the madness below. Wyverns passed the skies, silent save for the batting of wings, while in quiet streets the dead marched in blind patrols. Athal had brought me to the balcony when I'd asked for a view, and I'd remained here ever since. My hands itched for a bottle, but I'd forced myself to indulge other vices. I could think of few things more foolish than getting drunk in Keter, much as it would have relieved me. Hakram had already come and gone, getting me to eat from a plate when I did not truly need to and then sitting in silence. Offering wordlessly to listen, if I wanted to talk. I had not taken him up on it, for once. Neither Indrani nor Masego had come up. They tended to avoid me, when I was in a mood. Vivienne had passed to discuss the treaties for a half hour, and left when she realized

my mind was only halfway there. It was time, I supposed, for the sixth to make an appearance.

Akua Sahelian was a sight, under moonlight, and how I'd shaped her had little to do with it. She'd had a touch of the eerie even before the changes, that too-perfect look Praesi highborn had bred into their lines. Soninke more than Taghreb, true, but the difference was less than you'd think. Aisha was from a family long past its glory, and she was still worth more than a passing look. Diabolist's grown of silver and blue bunched up around her body as she leant against the balustrade by my side. I drew from the pipe and blew the mouthful of smoke out.

"And here you are," I said. "The proverbial devil on my shoulder."

"Is that to be my purpose?" Akua mused. "Let us spin wicked weaves, then. You lack not for enemies to entrap."

"You've got games afoot," I said. "I knew you would when I let you out. But I am not in the mood for them tonight, Sahelian."

"No," she said softly. "Evidently not. You spoke with the Dead King, without our knowledge."

My fingers tightened against the dragonbone shaft. I forced them to loosen.

"I did," I admitted.

"Such a creature can foster madness with but a sentence, when speaking to the weak-minded," she told me. "I would not put stock in what it peddled."

"An interesting thought," I said. "Since a lot of what it peddled sounded like Praesi rhetoric."

"We have our exalted," Akua said. "Triumphant, Traitorous. The Maleficents and the Terribilises. Yet there is reason we do not hallow Trismegistus' name so. Terror and awe are not treasured bedfellow among my kind. Our favourite gods are those that bleed."

"God, huh," I mused. "I keep hearing people throw that word around. Been guilty of that as well. But to this day I'm not sure what it means."

"There are those that would say the term is a mere recognition of power," the shade said.

I inhaled the smoke, filling my lungs before releasing.

"And you?"

"A fulcrum, perhaps," Akua said. "Nothing more or less than the point on which levers pivot. The weight of it is to be respected, but not held sacred."

"Except for the ones that get capitalized," I said.

"Oh," Diabolist said quietly, "not even those. When Below taught us of holy betrayal, it did not hold itself separate. It might be the single truest form of worship, to betray even our patrons."

There was a deep and abiding madness to the Wasteland, I thought. It had sunk into the bones of that land, mottled the souls of the people that dwelled within it. And still, part of me sung to hear the words. The unrelenting defiance in the face of even the Gods. Praes had shaped Callow as much as the other way around. In that tight embrace of need and hatred, we had each served as

the crucible of the other. Diabolist would betray even the Gods, if she rose from that betrayal, and she was in so many ways the personification of the worst and the best of her homeland. I thought of John Farrier and his hard eyes, long lost to Summer's fire. Of Brandon Talbot, who would ride for Callow under any banner he could. Even of William, that tragedy of good intentions. *Would you hold a grudge against even the Gods?* I knew the answer to that, sure as my own heartbeat. To small slights, long prices.

There were none in this world or any that stood exempt from my people's rancour.

"You put up a fight," I suddenly said.

Scarlet eyes turned to me.

"What you did, Akua, it's not something I'll ever forgive," I murmured. "You showed me that, you know? That even as heroine I would have had no truck with absolution."

"It should not be forgiven," Diabolist said. "What are you, if you were wrong in this? That hatred should be stoked and kept burning, lest you forget the lessons it taught you."

I smiled ruefully.

"But you put up a fight," I said. "Against odds I'd flinch at. Against people that scare me still, for all the power I've gained. If there is any part of you that I can respect, it's that you might have been a monster but you were never once a coward."

"One of my ancestor once said that the spurs to greatness are never gentle," Akua said, sounding almost whimsical. "Mother often repeated that to me, when I balked at my sharper lessons."

"Did you really?" I asked. "Balk. Even once."

"I had a cradle-sister," Diabolist said. "One who shared my wet nurse. She was also charged with taking my canings until I reached an age where healing sorcery would not hamper my growth, but that was a rare enough occurrence. Her name was Zain. Common as dirt. I loved her, I suppose, in a way that children love those who so thoughtlessly love them back."

It was horrifying, deep down, that nothing of what had been spoken came as a surprise to me.

"When I was eight years old, Mother took me to the deepest chamber of the old labyrinths and put a stone knife in my hand," Akua said. "Zain lay prone on the altar, mind clouded by potions. Yet she was aware enough to know my face and reach out to me. She was scared, you see. Shivering like a doe. She was right to."

"You killed her," I said.

"My affection made her a valuable offering," the shade replied. "I had to be slapped twice before I cut her throat, and even then my reluctance made the wound a shallow one."

Akua laughed softly.

"That was the part I regretted most, in later years," she said. "She would have bled out twice as quickly, had my hand been steady. That was my mother's lesson, dear heart. Hesitation is never a virtue: faltering is only ever the mother of agony."

"Your mother was a monster," I quietly said.

"Mother was a failure," Akua said amusedly. "A far greater sin, in her eyes and mine."

I pulled at pipe again, standing silent under the insolent radiance of the moon.

"How much of that was a lie?" I finally asked.

"Not a word," Diabolist said. "Why bother, when the truth serves my purposes?"

"It doesn't change anything," I said. "You still are who you are. You still made the choices that you did."

"Oh, that was not my intent," Diabolist said. "The most important part of this tale is the moral, as your people are so fond of having."

The shade smiled.

"Do not hesitate, dearest Catherine," Akua Sahelian said. "If you are to cut the world, it is best to have a steady hand."

Chapter 36

Enchère

> "I've found that nothing quite sets the tone for council like strangling a courtier with my bare hands just before we begin."
>
> Dread Emperor Venal

I stared down at the unfurled scroll, a frown creasing my brow. When Athal had shown up along our communal breakfast with a scroll in hand I'd expected him to be bearing the Dead King's counteroffer. Instead, what I'd gotten was a neatly-penned report about how the world had gone on without me while we journeyed to Keter. I popped a blueberry in my mouth. That it most likely came from hell did not make it taste any less sweet. Swallowing, I wiped my fingers on the tablecloth.

"How old is this?" I asked.

The dark-haired man bowed.

"If it please you, Great Majesty, the last of what is written took place eight days ago as of this morning," he replied.

"Well," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "*Fuck* seems like the most appropriate reaction to that basket of stupid."

"Catherine?" Vivienne said, from her place across the table.

I pushed the scroll across, almost toppling a pitcher of fresh milk over it before Hakram leant over to catch it. I sent him a thankful look.

"Word from Callow?" Indrani asked, half a side of pork making her cheeks bulge.

"Swallow, you godsdamned savage," I said. "And something like that. Can someone tell me what the 'Lanterns' are, exactly? I think I got it from context but I'd rather be sure."

"The Levantine equivalent to the House of Light," Adjutant said.

Archer snorted, then finally swallowed.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "If to become an anointed brother you had to wrestle a basilisk. They don't have abbeys so much as warrior lodges. If they get

old enough they go into the Brocelian to fight monsters until one finally beats them."

Across the table, Vivienne flinched.

"Merciless Gods," she said. "What was she thinking?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "Not Hasenbach's greatest moment."

I glanced at Masego, who did not glance back. He turned a page, blindly groping for what he probably believed to be a cup of tea but was actually a pot of cream. Well, he'd notice after drinking. Probably.

"Are we to be kept in suspense?" Akua drily asked.

"I've been declared Arch-heretic of the East," I said. "By a conclave of the House of Light in Procer, the aforementioned Lanterns and a delegation of Speakers from Ashur."

"A worthy achievement," Diabolist praised. "This is the first I hear of the title being granted to one who has not climbed the Tower."

"It's a feudal disaster is what it is," Thief said. "It means that any oaths sworn to her are dissolved by holy writ and that any who follow her are 'estranged from the light of the Heavens'."

"I didn't think the First Prince would go this far just to break my truce with the northern crusade," I admitted. "Or that she had this much influence over the priests, to be honest."

"She should not have," Adjutant said. "The House is highly influential in Proceran politics, and pushes back hard when attempts are made to twist its arm. Several wars were fought over it, if I remember correctly."

"The three Liturgical Wars," Akua said. "One of the rare Proceran squabbles to involve even the Lycaonese. The last member of House Merovins' bloodline was slain during... the second, perhaps? I confess my Principate histories are not as comprehensive as they could be."

"Oh *fuck*," Vivienne suddenly said.

I'd told her it was the most appropriate reaction, hadn't I?

"Laure?" I asked.

She nodded, slumping into her seat.

"I can't even begin to parse the implications of that," she said.

"This is getting quite tedious," Akua noted.

"You might remember the priests back in Salia declared me an abomination, after First Liesse," I told the shade. "That whole resurrection affair got stuck in their throats."

The dark-skinned monster was not slow on the uptake, for all her other glaring flaws.

"You were crowned by a representative of the House of Light, in Laure," she said.

"I was."

"They've branded heretics all involved in the matter," Diabolist said, and it wasn't a guess.

"If they'd just tarred my name it wouldn't have been too bad," I said. "They tried something similar with Henry Landless after occupying Callow, though without foreigners signing on. But they accused Callowan priesthood of heresy. They *really* shouldn't have done that."

"We so declare the following," Vivienne read out loud. "That all who took part in the seventy-third conclave of Salia are guilty, of: perverse service to earthly powers, false righteousness for earthly purpose and, declaration of godless sanctions."

"That first one," Archer decided, "will be the title of my memoirs. I feel it really captures the spirit of what I'm about."

We decided in turn, as a family and also Akua, to pretend she had remained silent.

"All three of those are lesser heresies," Hakram gravelled. "That's situation's going to get worse at a brisk pace."

"It did," I grimly added. "The House in Laure also retroactively declared every hero to have tread Callowan grounds to be graceless. That's not so much protesting the verdict as setting fire to the courthouse."

"Graceless," Diabolist mused. "As in 'walk without the grace of the Heavens', I presume?"

I nodded with a grimace. That verse was from the Book of All Things, when speaking of villains who cloaked themselves in righteousness when seeing to their 'dark purposes'. *You shall know them from the true children of Above, for they walk without the grace of the Heavens.* The House of Light in Laure had essentially just declared over ten heroes to be villains in disguise. And then announced as much at every street corner of the largest city of the kingdom.

"They kept their shit together in Dormer, at least," Vivienne sighed. "They lodged a protest and want to appeal the conclave's decisions."

"Thief, rioters torched the House of Light in Vale when the priests refused to speak out," I said pointedly. "This is not a situation under control. Juniper's going to have to declare martial law, if she hasn't already."

"The House in Summerholm upheld Laure's declaration," Thief said, sounding appalled as her eyes reached the end of the scroll. "Gods. Denier's going to fold as well, Cat, you know that. You're popular with the merchants and the priests that far east hate it even when the crown tells that what to preach. And the only reason Marchford hasn't declared already is that it'll take a while for the news to reach there."

"I have no idea what Hasenbach was thinking," I admitted. "The northern army's in no shape to take the passage from Kegan even if it turns around. She's setting fire to the diplomatic options for no real gain I can see."

"You're assuming she is behind this," Akua said.

"If a clever opponent makes a foolish mistake," Hakram added, "it is either not a mistake or not that opponent's doing."

Grem One-Eye had written that, I recalled. In one of his treatises, when talking about how even a well-led army could blunder when the field officers were poorly trained.

"That would imply she's lost control of the going-ons in her own capital," Vivienne replied skeptically.

A shame that her understanding of what a crusade is was so lacking, but it is too late to leave the saddle once the lion is ridden. That was what the Dead King had said, when we'd spoken of Cordelia Hasenbach.

"They might be right," I said.

Thief turned to me, curious.

"If this was just the House in Procer I'd agree with you, but with the Lanterns and the Speakers?" I said. "No. She can't have that many hooks inside nations that were hostile to Procer until so recently. I think that Hasenbach might be losing her grip on parts of the Grand Alliance."

And wasn't that enough to have me dreading? Because Cordelia Hasenbach had, for all her brutal idealism, a pragmatic streak. The castles she wanted to built were down here, not up in the clouds. But if she was no longer leading the beast by the nose, then who was now in charge? Her refusal to offer even the slightest concession when we'd last spoken was starting to be cast in a different light. Her position was nowhere as assured as I'd believed. I clenched my fingers, then slowly unclenched them. Didn't matter, did it?

The mess was still in my lap, I had to deal with it.

"The Empress is going to throw a banquet, when she hears," Vivienne sighed. "Any possible bridges to the west just went up in smoke."

"Nok did too," I reminded her. "She's not exactly doing great at keeping her head above the water either. Black's wandering the countryside up to Gods know what, Warlock's nowhere to be seen and her coasts are burning. Not a great year for either of us."

A man cleared his throat. With a start, I realized Athal had been standing to the side this entire time. My mind whipped back, going over what we'd said with a fine comb. Had there been anything in there I'd truly hate for the Dead King to know? No, I realized after a moment. 'Bridges to the west' had unfortunate implications, but I doubted Neshamah was unaware I would have cut a deal with Procer instead of coming to him if I could.

"Do you have further use for me, Great Majesty?" he asked.

"I don't," I said. "Offer my thanks to the Dead King for his gift, Athal."

"I will do so promptly, honoured one," and with one last bow he left.

I popped another blueberry into my mouth. There was a clatter, like someone dropped a ceramic pot on the table.

"This is *cream*," Masego said, highly offended. "Why did none of you say anything?"

Well, I mused, at least the wait until my second talk with the Hidden Horror would not be absent of entertainment.

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The Hall of the Dead grew no less intimidating with repeat visits. The honour guard of Revenants had the same faces as the last time at least, so it was possible that fifty dead Named was the sum of his forces. On the other hand, it was a little too neat of a number and it wasn't like he'd have *fewer* than what we'd seen. I kept the thought off my face as we were welcomed into the throne room and Neshamah graciously invited us to be seated once more. No offer of a meal, this time, and it was easy to see why. Neat stacks of parchments awaited us at the table.

"Your proposal was a worthy one, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "Yet it needed... expansion. These are the terms I would offer instead. Take however long is necessary to familiarize yourself, I will take no offence."

I traded a subtle look with Thief. Yeah, he could have sent us those earlier. He'd meant for us to be as little prepared as possible, and to go over them in an unfamiliar place. The throne room of ancient Sepharah was not a location that invited careful reading, though ironically enough I could think of few places where paying attention to the exact wording would be more important. The Woe sat after I did, and with a nod at Neshamah I took a look at his proposal. A single paragraph of beautifully calligraphied Lower Miezan in, I was already blinking in surprise. I'd offered him the run of three principalities. Not even halfway into the first sheet of parchment, I was being asked for *eight*. All existing Lycaonese lands were included, and in addition to Cleves and Hainaut as I'd already put on the table he was also asking for Lyonis and Brus. Which would give him foothold on the opposite shores of the Tomb and the Grave, but also neatly encircle Lake Pavin. More worryingly, if he took all of Lyonis it meant his southern border was Salia. The *capital* of Procer.

Surprise only continuing to sink in, I thumbed through the other parchments. The alliance would be required to be announced publically. The invitation need be extended to him for at least one hundred years and – well, shit. He wanted me to occupy two principalities myself, Bayeux and Orne. The very principalities facing the two passes out of the Red Flower Vales. Last time that territory had been under Callowan rule was the days of the Queen of Blades, and even then they'd been tributaries more than vassals. Hakram was paying closer attention to the details, I saw, and I left him to it. I turned to the Dead King.

"Your Majesty," I said.

"Black Queen," the yellow-eyed thing replied lightly.

"This is a significant expansion of the terms offered," I said. "Which surprises me, given how amenable you seemed to the initial proposal."

"I was," the Hidden Horror agreed. "But then I was made a better offer."

The world slowed, and all I heard was the quickening of my pulse. A better offer. Who – no, that wasn't even a question worth asking was it?

"Dread Empress Malicia," I said, voice eerily calm.

"Has been an honoured guest of mine for some time," the Dead King said. "She also has an interest in securing an alliance, though I found it unsporting

to never give you such a chance. You currently look at a transcript of her latest offer, save for the addition of the occupation of Proceran territory. That is a boon I offer you myself."

It was no such thing, I thought. He wanted me to take a bite out of Procer so their attention would be divided when the day of reckoning came. And to ensure that no deal would be possible to make with Hasenbach or her replacement, since I'd have outright occupied part of their realm. Something that would be difficult for Malicia to achieve, since she'd need to reconquer Callow before getting anywhere near the Principate – and to do all of that while at odds with her finest generals.

"A bidding war," Akua said thoughtfully, the first time she had even spoken in this hall.

"I prefer to think of it as an auction," the Dead King replied. "With the face of Calernia in our time as the prize."

I let out a long breath, forced myself to smile.

"An intriguing offer," I said. "Might we be allowed to discuss it between ourselves before giving you an answer?"

"By all means," Neshamah smiled. "Should you require light to be shed on any point, my Hosts are at your service. They were made aware of my intent."

I rose to my feet, feeling like a dozen pounds of lead were tied to them. I bowed exactly as low as was required. Shooting a quelling look at Archer, who looked about to speak, I gestured for the others to follow me out.

We'd been had, but here was not the place to rage about it.

—

Vivienne slapped down her pile of parchments on the table the moment the wards went up.

"That *fucker*," she snarled. "So much for 'negotiations in good faith', Hakram."

I spent a moment wondering whether I was responsible for the fact that my closest companions could be so cavalier as to call the likes of the Dead King 'that fucker' while shuffling uneasily under the silent pressure of Masego's sorcery. Being under that had not become any more pleasant with the passing of time. The itch was already under my skin, bringing restlessness with it. Whatever it was I had become, it was not meant to be *contained*. My eyes flicked to Ajutant, who had ignored Thief's jibe to bring our finest map of Calernia to the table. He methodically set aside the parchments to spread it completely, then set down iron figurines at the borders the Dead King's last proposal had outlined.

"A lot of land to evacuate, even with forewarning," Archer noted, dragging a chair to the table.

The ugly scraping sound of wood against stone made me want to rip her hair out, but that was an almost daily occurrence with Indrani.

"Around a third of the Principate, in sum," Akua noted. "Though the Lycaonese territories are the poorest and least populated by a wide margin. Archer's warning is somewhat inaccurate, however. Keter's advance will not be imme-

diate or uncontested: it is not impossible for mass displacement to occur before the principalities fall."

"It would mean several million refugees," Hakram said calmly. "Hunger, sickness and weather will slay them by the thousands."

"We'd get two principalities out of the deal, though," Archer said cheerfully. "That's nice of him. Good change of pace from the whole defence thing we've been on about. Would be pleasant to let them worry about us instead the other way around, for once."

"We're in no position to take or hold those lands, Indrani," Vivienne said flatly. "And the moment we announced publically that we're allying with the Kingdom of the Dead, half of Callow turns on us. Malicia has us beat there. The Wasteland might get worried if she announces that, but it won't *revolt*."

"It should not be impossible to remove that part if we compensate with other coin," Hakram said. "Brabant, or perhaps Arans? The latter would significantly enlarge his border with the Golden Bloom. The elves might not take kindly to that."

"It would also mean direct border with his expanded realm, if we take Bayeux ourselves," Akua said. "Salia itself would be a superior bid. Let him lose a few hordes besieging the heart of Procer."

"Or we could leave," Hierophant said, voice slicing through the conversation.

They all turned to look at him. Slowly I took out my pipe and ripped a satchel to stuff it.

"I've already learned enough from perusing the city to study for decades," Masego shrugged. "And there are more echoes to be harvested while we return. If the terms are not to our satisfaction, why do we not simply go?"

I caught his eye and looked down meaningfully at my pipe. With a sigh, he flicked his wrist and a flash of flame saw to it.

"We need a counterweight, Masego," Vivienne said tiredly. "The crusade rolls through Callow otherwise. I don't like that we're playing his game, but we're low on choices."

"Must we?" Akua said.

My eyes turned to her, and she inclined her head.

"Let Malicia unleash the Hidden Horror," she said. "She is a rival here, yet not necessarily a foe. She would desire the Dead King rampant no more than us. Giving ground here allows us to achieve our purpose – an invasion of Procer by the Kingdom of the Dead – without wounding our reputation the way making that pact ourselves would. On the other hand, a bidding war hurts both our positions. We would need to make greater and greater concessions, with the Dead King the only true victor of that strife."

"We will not," Hakram said calmly.

As he should. Of all of them, he knew me best. I inhaled the wakeleaf and blew it out, earning the odd sight of smoke going through Akua's body.

"We will not," I agreed. "We don't know what terms Malicia would end up giving, but I am quite certain they won't involve anything aimed at limiting casualties."

"She's right about part of it, Cat," Thief said, sounding pained at the admission. "We can't keep escalating our offers. We'll end up selling out half the continent and it won't even come in sight of the Empire's bottom line."

"Go a step deeper, Vivienne," I said. "Look at how Malicia has been behaving since the crusade began. How has she been *acting*?"

"She hasn't," Hakram said, eyes sharpening.

Akua softly laughed.

"Poisoning the river when owning a well," she mused in Mtethwa. "She does play an exquisite game, doesn't she?"

"She let Callow bleed against the crusaders, but not to weaken the crusade like we thought," I said. "She was weakening *us*. The same way she let Black bleed his loyalist legions. The point was never to deal with the Tenth Crusade, it was to cripple her internal threats enough she can handle them herself. Because it didn't really matter to her, whether the passage or the Vales fell. It was never going to be the front she fought this war on."

"The Dead King," Thief said quietly. "The Dead King is her army."

"We could bargain for a year and she'd still go deeper," I said. "Because this is her play. This is the force she *needs* on the field."

"That might be true," Vivienne said. "But it is no solution."

"Our offer doesn't change," I said calmly. "And like so many troubled young souls before us, we will let scripture guide our hands."

"There's stuff in the Book of All Things about this?" Archer said, leaning forward. "Damn. Maybe I should read it."

"It's a Wasteland foe we face," I said. "So it's that most sacred of Wasteland traditions we'll turn to."

I spat out a mouthful of smoke, let it wreath my face as I smiled.

"I speak, of course, of regicide."

Chapter 37

Offing

> "Callowans as a people can be summed up by the fact that, before the Uncivil Wars had even come to a close, it'd become a common boast among the populace that the Black Queen had not even spent a sennight in Keter before having several counts of arson and murder to her name."
>
> Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara
> Follow the food. So went Thief's advice.

That Malicia or a flesh puppet were in the city was a given: Neshamah wouldn't bother to seriously negotiate with a High Lord. It would have been like a man having to keep a serious face while making a pact with mutton chop, in his eyes. I'd personally been of the opinion that it was a near certainty that the puppet would be the one in Keter, since the Empress leaving the Tower unattended for more than a few weeks was a recipe for usurpation. Akua, however, had made it clear that with the right precautions it was possible for Malicia to be here in person while a puppet held the Tower for her. She was not the kind of Empress that had a strong presence outside Ater: apparently even by imperial standards she didn't leave her seat of power often. It made sense, in a way. Malicia wasn't a fighter, and for decades she'd had Black to send after messes sword in hand. Her almost cripplingly-focused talents were in rule and intrigue, and they were most effectively wielded from the Imperial court. Diabolist noted that the court at the Tower wasn't necessarily the centre of power in a Tyrant's reign – Terribilis II had barely held one and distributed most its traditional authority to Ater's bureaucracy. Malicia, however, had inherited a festering snake pit of a court from her predecessor Nefarious and then promptly encouraged the most murderous leanings of the highborn by rewarding the victorious in those struggles with riches and influence.

That, however, had been decades ago. Before the Conquest or my birth. Now that Malicia had spent years removing the aristocrats from the bureaucracy and Black had unceremoniously drummed them out of the Legions, her

hold on Ater and the Tower was extremely hard to shake. She could afford to let the High Lords break their teeth on her power base while she placed most her attention on the negotiations in Keter. Akua even speculated that she might be baiting out would-be usurpers in order to have them out in the open when she returned home with a Keteran alliance. That turnaround was likely to see their own families turn on those ambitious few, neatly decapitating any nascent opposition without her having to lift a finger. It certainly sounded like Malicia, I had to admit. A plan with several ancillary benefits unfolding quietly while her enemies swung at mist. Regardless, it'd been a priority to find out whether we were dealing with the actual Empress or a puppet. From a narrow perspective, it didn't matter which it was if we managed to slaughter them all anyway: the result would still be us with the only bidder at the Dead King's auction. Looking at it more broadly, though, the difference was major. For one, if I killed Malicia in the flesh I'd be gaining a 'legitimate' claim to the Tower.

Kill the Empress, be the Empress: that was the law of the Wasteland. If you managed to scatter all the other carrion birds pecking at the corpse, anyway. Getting involved in the flaming tar pit that was your average Praesi succession was the least of what I needed right now, and pretty high on my list of 'things I would prefer never to have to deal with'. Malicia would have to go if the Liesse Accords were going to be implemented properly and I couldn't deny that the longer she had to scheme the more dangerous she became, but as long as the Empress lived there was a lid on the Wasteland jar of crazy. Much like Cordelia Hasenbach, she wasn't someone I liked facing but she remained very much preferable to whoever would step up if she was removed from power. I wouldn't put it beyond a High Lord trying to climb the Tower to take a swing at me as their foremost 'rival' even while the Empire was being attacked by Ashur. Particularly if their lands were far enough from the sea. There were dozens of examples in the histories to be found of Praesi cheerfully emptying a whole quiver into their foot just like that. On the other hand, taking Malicia prisoner just wasn't feasible. Not in *Keter*. And for all that Praesi ambition could end up biting me, there was also a decent chance that instead the Empire would collapse into civil war as every prominent highborn tried to claim the Tower. I couldn't even dismiss the possibility that the legions in the Wasteland would try to proclaim Black as Dread Emperor and fill mass graves with whoever objected to that.

I didn't relish the loss of life it would involve, but if Praes was clawing at itself it wasn't looking at Callow. It might be a risk worth taking.

"So I've got a report for you," Archer announced, strolling through the wards.

She had a bottle in hand, I noted. That was definitely not what I had sent her out for.

"If you blew off reconnaissance to get drunk, there will be consequences," I mildly said.

"I would never," Indrani assured me. "I just happened to find a cellar while

on my very serious fact-finding mission, and it would have been criminally negligent of me not to investigate."

"Was it locked?" I sighed.

"Is it really a lock if it breaks?" Archer mused. "That's a question for the philosophers, Catherine. We're straying off topic."

So I'd need to offer Athal an apology, then. Hakram's suggestion that we just make a scroll template with blank spaces to fill in with the latest thing she'd done was becoming increasingly tempting.

"This is what we call Atalantian baptismal, Cat," Indrani seriously told me, putting the bottle on the table. "I've heard that if an entire glass is drunk in a single sitting, it will outright kill a man."

"I'm considering killing as well, at the moment," I informed her.

"That would be a grave miscarriage of justice," Indrani told me. "Since I found it inside the only other palace that has servants in it."

My eyes narrowed. I'd asked the Dead King for further time to debate his offer before our next conversation and sent both Archer and Thief out find the tracks of any Imperial presence in the city. Follow the food, Vivienne had said. Malicia's delegation would need to eat, would be offered all the trapping of hospitality as the honoured guests that they were. That left traces, in a city where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were walking corpses. I set aside the pile of scrolls that held our now-irrelevant bargaining position and dragged out the rough sketch of the palaces surrounding the Hall of the Dead I'd asked Masego to make. There were five in whole, forming a circle interrupted by the same number of avenues going into the city-fortress. The Silent Palace, our own, was slightly to the left of the gates into the Hall.

"Which one?" I asked.

Indrani jabbed her finger onto the parchment. Slightly to the right, on the opposite side of the black stone spire.

"The Threefold Reflection," I said.

Athal had helpfully provided the names of every existing palace when I'd casually asked as much, feigning idle curiosity. The dark-haired man had also revealed there were old sorceries protecting each of them, though he hadn't gone into detail. Not all that surprising. This whole city was a fortress, not even the guesthouses would be toothless.

"The place is... unsettling," Archer said, grabbing the seat across from me. "The layout is wrong. Hallways lead where they shouldn't: I went through the same threshold twice and ended up in different places both times. I'd call it a maze, but you can map out a maze. There's wizardly bullshit at play here I think might rule that out."

"Did you find out how many people are in the delegation?" I asked.

"I kept out of sight," she said, shaking her head. "Got a look at one of them, though. Tall man in steel plate, silent. Black iron mask over his face."

I nodded.

"I've seen those before," I said. "They're called Sentinels. The personal guard of whoever holds the Tower, though there's enough they count more as a personal army. Supposedly spells and potions keep them unconditionally loyal."

"Might be we have ourselves the real Empress, then," Indrani said.

"They're exactly the kind of guards a puppet would bring as well," I said. "Won't talk, can't betray and they probably have triggers inside their body that'll kill them if someone tries to grab and extract."

"Would they obey a puppet, though?" Archer asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted after a moment. "But I know who we can ask."

I exerted my will and tugged at Akua's leash, gently. There was resistance. I tugged a second time, and when I did not feel her moving towards me I rolled my eyes and simply dragged her here. The shade poured out of the wall about thirty heartbeats later and only then did I loosen my grip. Diabolist was grimacing.

"That," she said, "was exceedingly unpleasant. And I barely had time to bid my farewells."

"Do it again," Indrani grinned.

I ignored her.

"Would Sentinels obey a flesh simulacrum the Empress occasionally takes over?" I asked.

Akua's brow rose.

"If instructed to, certainly," she said. "Authority over them can be even granted by certain court titles, it is not held sorely by the Tyrant."

"Not a tie breaker, then," I told Indrani.

"Was that the sum total of your inquiry?" Diabolist asked, sounding a little miffed. "I *was* having a conversation of some import."

"Tell me about it," I invited, repressing a grin.

Occasionally yanking Akua's chain had lost none of the satisfaction even after the novelty faded.

"We will be expected to meet with the Dead King two days from now, at twilight," Akua said. "Excuses can be stretched no further."

I drummed my fingers against the table as Archer cracked open the bottle from – Atalante, was it? Strange, I remembered reading somewhere they were the religious ones in the League. The House of Light tended to frown on drinking to excess. The Callowan one, anyway, for all I knew it was different down there.

"So that's our window," I said. "Two days. Hopefully Thief has more to add, because we're low on information at the moment and I don't relish the thought of attempting an assassination half blind in *Keter* of all places."

Whether or not Vivienne had anything to say remained a mystery for several hours after that. Hakram returned before too long, having exhausted the few points I'd sent him to seek clarification on with the Hosts to keep up the pretence of ongoing debate on our part. I went for a walk after that, in part to clear my mind but mostly so I get away from those fucking wards. I knew why

we'd had Masego put it up, but it didn't make staying under them any more pleasant. I decided to get something useful done while I was out and about, so I moved towards the highest circles of the Silent Palace to get a look at the terrain between us and this Threefold Reflection the Empress allegedly resided in. The layout of this place was all interlocked circles so getting oriented was easy, but I'd failed to grasp the varying heights. The circle furthest out was one of the lowest, the rooftop almost a terrace. From the flat black marble I could get a good look at the broad open space that separated the palaces from the Hall of the Dead, but little else. There were, I noted, patrols now. There'd been a few of those before that I remembered, but nowhere as large or frequent. Was Neshamah tightening his watch? *You told me Malicia was here and that she was at odds with me*, I thought. *Considering that little talk we had the day before about how betrayal is a passing thing, that was as good as an invitation to kill her.*

Evidently, that didn't mean he would make it easy for me. This was a test of sorts, I decided. I doubted that breaching the laws of hospitality would rank in even the worst hundred of the sins to the Dead King's name, but he'd keep the pretence. He might not actively obstruct me, but unless I remained discreet there would be consequences. That didn't bode well. The Woe had many talents, but discretion was not usually counted among them – though that was in large part my own fault, it had to be said. I could barely make out the edge of the Threefold Reflection from the side of the Hall of the Dead, but I'd meant to get a good look and this told me less than nothing. Casting a look at the grounds below, freshly-scrubbed paving stones, I shrugged and leapt. I'd gone without armour for the day, so my knees barely bent when I landed. Cloak fluttering around me, I nodded at the approaching patrol as they turned to me. Archer had told me of the breeds of dead there were to be found in the city, but there were no differences to my senses. They all felt like little balls of will working a corpse, and though some might feel stronger it was not a certain thing. For one, the officers were supposed to be the Binds – those with souls and real intelligence – but the presence for some of the officer-armoured dead were almost entirely faded.

I'd have to rely on sight to tell them apart, and sight could be tricked.

"Just going for a walk," I told them.

A corpse in a lovely sculpted iron breastplate and conical helmet nodded.

"If you require escort, Great Majesty, it can be provided," he offered.

"Won't be necessary," I said. "Though I thank you for the courtesy."

They resumed their patrol without a word, offering polite nods when they passed me by. How long had that one been dead, I wondered? I could be centuries. I'd glimpsed flesh beneath the helm, but that meant nothing. Necromancy could preserve that near indefinitely. Strolling as casually as a girl could with a sword at her hip and a cloak embroidered with the banners of her defeated foes could – not all that casually, I felt safe in assuming – I passed by the palace separating mine from the Threefold Reflection. It was the largest of

those I'd seen, and the Silent Palace dwarfed the one in Laure. The Garden of Crowns, Athal had called it. Wasn't seeing a lot of those, but the garden part seemed accurate. Instead of a single massive construction, this one was a display of smaller pavilions lost in a beautiful sprawl of stone and greenery. The beauty was somewhat spoiled by the fact that the trees and grass seemed to sprout directly from granite, but that might just have been me. It was empty, or so I thought. Then I caught sight of a silhouette seated under a shaded living oak arbour, looking down at a crystal-clear pond. Man, not a woman. Creation had not seen fit to have me run into Malicia, then. Torn between moving on towards the Threefold Reflection and having a closer look at this oddity, I eventually went for the oddity. The palace wasn't going anywhere.

I tread softly on the pebble paths that winded through the greenery, keeping an eye on the stranger. Too pale to be Soninke or Taghreb. Either an outside acquisition by the Empress, or entirely unrelated to her. I confirmed the second thought when I came close enough my otherworldly senses picked up on what lied within the man: power. Not a Name, no. That kind of power had a peculiar taste to it, life and weight and something like inevitability. What I felt from him was cousin to that, or perhaps just the remains of it. Like words engraved in stone left unreadable by time and tide you could still barely make out some letters from. *Revenant*, I thought. Indrani had told me they kept a shade of what they'd once been after their raising. The dead man did not react even when I'd come well within earshot for a mortal, staring silently into the pond. I could make out shapes in the water, fish and water lilies. The way light caught on them allowed me to realize they were not living things but sculpted and painted stone. I put aside the mild discomfort I felt at the sight and studied the man closer. Late forties, or so he'd been before his death. A crown of white hair came in sparse tufts, and the beginnings of beard could be seen on his jaw. His clothes were rich drapery, though the colour had faded with the centuries, and there was a sword on his lap. None of this mattered half as much as the brooch on his chest: a tasteful little twist of silver with two golden ornaments on it.

Bells.

"There is no need to stand there, child," the Revenant said. "It is not my pond, nor my ruinous light that shines down upon it."

I swallowed.

"You're a Fairfax," I blurted out, and immediately cringed.

Catherine Silvertongue struck again. The Revenant turned to study me, pale brown eyes surprised.

"King Edward of Callow," he said. "And you are Deoraithe. A daughter of House Iarsmai?"

It had to be an Edward, didn't it? Callow had those like the Principate had its never-ending gaggle of First Prince Louis – too many to know by rote save for the numbers at the end. Suddenly I was glad I hadn't worn a crown. It would have felt tasteless in front of a Fairfax of the old blood. When he'd

spoken that title it had been with that muted ripple of power, the one that said it hadn't merely been a title for him.

"Just a foundling," I replied, shaking my head.

"Named, then," he sagely said, and with a courtly gesture invited me to sit.

I settled into the stone seat by his own, tongue-tied.

"Would that be Edward the Fifth?" I said, desperately trying to remember which of those had gotten themselves killed while crusading.

"The Seventh," the king chided. "You will know my daughter Mary, at least. She was but three when I was claimed, she must be the longest-reigning monarch Callow has ever seen."

Oh *shit*. He was talking about Mary the Songbird. That entire reign had been a mess: the Marquess of Vale had fought a short but bloody civil war to seize the regency and refused to give it up even after she came of age. He'd kept her imprisoned in the Songbird's Cage until one of her cousins rebelled and overthrew him. She didn't survive the assault on Laure, smothered with a pillow by her captor before the palace could be breached. There were at least half a dozen songs and plays about the tragedy. Her cousin took the crown, after, and all House Lerness of Vale hung save for the children.

"I have heard of her," I diplomatically said. "I'm sorry to tell you that House Fairfax is gone. As far as I know, the last member of it died during a Praesi invasion over twenty years ago."

The man chuckled.

"It was dead long before that, girl," he said. "I share not a drop of blood with the famous Eleonor. My forbear merely kept the name to justify her rule after her husband had the poor taste of dying before getting her with child."

I blinked. Yolanda the Wicked, that. Scholars centuries later still debated or not whether she'd been a villain or just *extremely* unpopular. Some argued she'd been demonized because of her Proceran origins and that she'd had lawful claim to rule, even though her children did not. The other side tended to point out she'd had the rest of House Fairfax murdered to ensure said children did in fact succeed her. This felt like a history lesson, until I remembered I was sitting next to breathing history. Well, moving anyway.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself, since *girl* and *child* were starting to get on my nerves.

"I would welcome you to these grounds, Catherine Foundling, but there is no welcome to be had in this earthly pit of devils," King Edward said.

I nodded my thanks, for lack of a better answer.

"If I may ask, Your Majesty," I said. "You seem. . . "

"Lucid?" the dead man smile. "The Abomination's little jest. Most of my fellows are of more taciturn bent. You see, when he came for me I told him that even in the face of eternity I would spit on him and all his works."

My fingers clenched. Evidently, Neshamah had decided to test the truth of that.

"Do not look so appalled," the king gently said. "I will yet have the last laugh over that dark creature, even if I must wait until the Last Dusk for it. Though I am bound to serve in this place it is only a passing thing."

"So you're the guardian of this," I probed, hand moving to vaguely encompass our surroundings.

"In a manner of speaking," King Edward said. "This is the Garden of Crowns, young Foundling. None serve here who were not royalty while they drew breath. The power once bestowed on me by Above has merely earned the role of the sword guarding this palace."

My eyes narrowed.

"So there's a former Named guarding all five palaces," I said.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Though the Abomination changes the watchers at a whim. The Bloody Sword once kept vigil over the that unpleasant pyramid beyond the Garden, but has since been replaced. Other than I, the only one who has remained for more than a century is the Thief of Stars."

"Oh?" I said, blood running cold. "And where does he guard?"

"She," he corrected. "The Silent Palace. It amused the Abomination to bind her there, as she attempted to rob it whilst living."

So we'd had a heroine with a talent for discretion breathing down our neck the entire time without a single one of us noticing. Lovely. This assassination plot was already getting off to a great start.

"You display great curiosity as to the nature of this pit," King Edward said calmly. "I will not inquire as to your purpose, as I would be bound to then speak it. But you are born of Callow, are you not?"

"I am," I warily agreed.

"It has been a very long time," he said quietly, "since I have spoken to one of my people. And I have worried, over the years. We warred with the Principate mere decades before they came, *beggars at my door*, asking for our swords to march north for their sake. Yet I know the gratitude of princes is an ephemeral thing. And to the east, the Enemy ever lurks. You spoke of an invasion?"

The snarl in his voice when he spoke of Procer had a warm feeling in my belly, I wouldn't deny it. I'd run out of patience with them as well, it was reassuring to know I was in good company there. Unfortunately, I had few good tales to tell him.

"We call it the Conquest," I said. "They won at the Fields of Streges and swept over the Callow. Until recently we were under occupation."

"That patch of grass has been watered by more armies than rainstorms," King Edward ruefully said. "It does not matter. The beast swells fat with the meat of us but it ever chokes on our bones. There will be another Eleonor, sooner or later."

I didn't know how to tell him that none had come. That if she'd ever been born, the closest thing I had to a father had cut her throat before her name could be known. That I might the closest thing to her we had, and wasn't that a horrifying thought?

"We're under siege," I said. "The Tenth Crusade marches right through us and attempts at peace have failed. The princes of Procer wants to carve us up and I am unsure how far up that desire runs."

"Procerans are always hungry," King Edwards said darkly. "And when that hunger leads them to the brink, they weep for others to pay the dues in their stead. Hold the Vales, young Foundling. And watch the Blessed Isle for a Wasteland knife."

I bleakly laughed. How could I tell him that the ruling Dread Empress was out for my blood, trying to crush me underfoot, and that she was *still* the closest thing I had to an ally at the moment? The dead man idly brushed his fingers against his brooch, then spoke up hesitatingly.

"It is unseemly to ask, I know," he said. "Yet, my daughter. . . "

I thought of pale green eyes, and the kindest lie I'd ever been told. That it wouldn't get easier.

"She is still," I said with a smile, "spoken of in song."

The naked relief on his face only made it worse.

"She would have loved that," he said with a quirk of the lips. "She had a lovely singing voice, my Mary. And she was good, even as a child. *Kind*. That is a rare thing in a ruler. There is a place for harshness, but kindness is the mother of prosperity."

I nodded slowly. I couldn't stand to stay here any longer, next to the man I'd lied to and his long-dead memories, so slowly I rose to my feet.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty," I said, bowing.

"Don't," he said. "I am not a fool, young Catherine."

He smiled, like we shared a secret.

"The first Albans were seneschals of Laure long before they were kings," he told me. "And Eleonor, for all her virtues, was born a mere knightess. There is no shame in one's birth. We are what we bring into this world, not what brought us into it."

He rose as well, and touched my wrist.

"Stand tall, Queen Catherine," King Edward the Seventh told me. "Stand proud. We have been broken before, humbled and rent asunder. We have crawled through the blood of our kin and suffered the yoke of tyrants. It does not matter. We do not yield, we do not *bend* even when the sky comes tumbling down on our heads. Keep your grudges close, child, and never forget them. We are Callowans, and for every slight there is a price."

Ours will be long, the song went, *and paid twice*.

Woe on us all, but if the Gods demanded my home be ashes then the Gods would burn.

Bonus Chapter: Fatalism I

> "There is enough room to fit the entire span of Creation between the Heavens and the mouths of priests."
>
> Antoine Merovins, twenty-second First Prince of Procer

It'd been the Battle of the Camps that started the fire.

Cordelia, in retrospect, could see how it had all unfolded. If the army under Amadis Milenan had been defeated by mortal arms it might have been possible to smother the first flames before they caught, but the Black Queen had not deigned to offer that opportunity. The Prince of Iserre could have been ruined in the High Assembly if he'd blundered and lost dozens of thousands on some Callowan field to a superior general, but who could castigate him for deaths borne from the *sky* opening over his army? You might as well blame a man for a storm or an earthquake. Milenan had then made pacts with the Callowans and promptly surrendered himself into their hands as a guarantor of that truce. He was a folk hero in Alamans lands, now. The selfless prince who had put his life in the hands of the savages to spare his soldiers a slow and painful death. A true exemplar of Proceran *noblesse oblige*. His royal confederates had not even waited until they returned to the Principate before beginning to lionize the man through letters and songs. Even rats could man a ship, when the alternative was sinking.

There could be no serious effort to place the blame on the Grey Pilgrim, either, even if he had been the informal leader of the Chosen with the northern host. Aside from the Levantine hero's own leave of absence as a hostage in Laure, it would have hollowed the Grand Alliance from within to besmirch the reputation the Dominion's favourite son. Alienated quite a few heroes as well, and not only those that shared his origins. Every report Cordelia had received about the short assembly of every Chosen before they split between armies had hammered home the implication that the White Knight might be the presumptive leader of the heroes of the Tenth Crusade but that the Peregrine was highly influential. Mobilizing Chosen was like herding cats at the best of times, and the First Prince felt ill at the notion of having to do so after having publicly disgraced their communal kindly grandfather. In the face of earthly powers, the heroes tended to close ranks: they would see this as an outright attack.

In the end, no one could be blamed – which meant everyone was to blame. Especially the Black Queen and her cadre of wicked fae and perfidious villains, served willingly by her armies of Callowan heretics, but there'd been no lack of fault thrown about within the Principate. Most of it had been laid at her feet. She was losing grip on the princes, she'd said. After all, her own subjects had preferred making truce with the Black Queen to fighting until the end. The Levantines had snickered in the beards, making sly comments about the worth of Proceran soldiery. Cordelia had spent many a sleepless night containing the damage, making pacts across the entire eastern belt of principalities to ensure the retreating army would be supplied and reinforced on its march south to join her uncle in waging war against the Carrion Lord. It had all come to nothing, as not even a fortnight passed before the news of the bloody draw at the Red Flower Vales reached Salia.

In terms of fighting forces, the battle had been costly yet no great wound. Military superiority had been maintained by a wide enough margin the remaining armies of the Black Knight could be ground to dust on an open field. In matters of reputation, however? It had been a crippling blow. Uncle Klaus' repute would not be so fragile a single reversal would upend it, but the Lycaonese had *enemies* in the south. Like poison in the wine the rumours had spread that the Iron Prince had grown doddering in his old age. That Cordelia had known of his senility yet ignored in an attempt to bring glory to her kin. It had been a crack in her pedestal, and now the jackals had bared their teeth. The coalition of royalty that had seen her rise to the throne, Lycaonese and northern Alamans, had remained loyal. But the the edges of her majority in the Highest Assembly had frayed. The tipping point had been one of the harshest arguments she'd had with her uncle that she could remember. She'd wanted him to split the army at the Vales and send half of it in pursuit of the Carrion Lord's legions, but he had flatly refused. Bayeux would burn, he'd said, and perhaps Aisne as well – but then the Praesi would find themselves surrounded and crushed. By remaining at the Vales he was forcing Callow to remain on the defensive and readying the snatch the initiative as soon as the passes were cleared.

In matters of military strategy, Cordelia trusted none more than Klaus Papenheim. Yet he was failing to see the broader canvas in which he took action: the Prince of Bayeux had signified that his vote could no longer be counted on the very evening he'd learned that his principality would see no reinforcements. His kinswoman in Aisne put forward a motion of protest in the Assembly the following day, and though it was defeated it could be understood from the public denunciation that her vote would no longer be for sale at further sessions. In the wake of that blow, like carrion to carnage, the self-proclaimed Kingdom of Callow had sent formal request to join the Grand Alliance.

The feeding frenzy that ensued was a *heinous* thing.

It'd been impossible to keep it quiet. Half a dozen Ashuran committees would be presented with the papers, and it was a certainty at least one of the

sitters among them would have a loose tongue – and that was without even considering the Levantines, whose lords and ladies argued about even their *own* state secrets in broad daylight. The viciousness of the rhetoric that followed surprised even the First Prince, who had once believed she knew the worst the Assembly had to peddle. The Arlesites principalities had been lukewarm at the notion, many more concerned by the massing armies of the League than any matters Callowan, but the Alamans? Three different princes spent half an Assembly session railing at the heresy inherent in treating with a woman the House of Light had declared abomination. War on Callow must be prosecuted to the last holdout, every trace of Evil scoured from that backwards kingdom even if it took torches to see the business done. A choice had to be made, then, in how Cordelia would spend her influence. She could either make quiet concessions and assurances behind closed doors so that no coalition of princes numerous enough to unseat her formed, or she could call in every favour she'd accumulated since her crowning to have the proposal shoved through the Highest Assembly's throat.

She'd been teetering on the brink of a decision, when Catherine Foundling called on her. That hard-eyed young woman bearing a mantle of power with eerie nonchalance, speaking of peace and treaties and alliances even as she raised thousands from the dead and split the sky asunder with her wrath. The greatest warlord of their age, with a string of impossible victories to her name – against her own people, yes, but also the Wasteland and the legendary hosts of the fae. She'd murdered a god, it was whispered. She had tricked a Choir into resurrecting her, laughed in the face of the mercy it offered. It took will, Cordelia knew, to deny even the shadow of the Heavens. That smiling girl in faded plate had borne the full weight of their hatred and *walked away whole*. Her madness must be one beyond measure. What kind of titanic arrogance did it take for a young girl to believe she knew better than even the Gods? And yet when she had sat across Cordelia in that strange shadowed world, she had made a reasonable offer. Abdication, if on her own terms. Alliance against the Empire, for assurances of Callowan independence. And so the First Prince had hesitated.

Then reality had come calling, of course. It was a tempting offer, as devils were wont to provide, but it would shatter the Grand Alliance. The Dominion's highborn would never brook such a compromise willingly, and twisting their arm into accepting it would make it certain Levant would withdraw from the Alliance the moment the Tenth Crusade ended. The Thalassocracy might agree, as Magon Hadast misliked having his finest war fleets abroad while Nicae stirred near his belly, but it was no sure thing. And if Cordelia accepted the Callowan offer, backed it in the Highest Assembly and proposed it to the Grand Alliance only for it to be spurned by her own allies? She would be unseated within the month. For a moment she dared to walk the line anyway, to try to secure such an overwhelming diplomatic *triumph* that not a soul would be able to deny she had won the war with words instead of swords. It failed, of

course. Foundling trusted her no more than Cordelia trusted the other woman, and seemed to have grown more reluctant to slay her people since the Liesse Rebellion – even if such a sacrifice would ultimately result in a lesser loss of lives. It had been the correct choice, she knew.

And still, sometimes, she thought of the cold bleakness in the Black Queen's eye. Of the woeful oath she'd spoken. She did not sleep well, on those nights, if she slept at all. Her attendants had grown skilful at masking the circles around her eyes with powders, and brews by the palace alchemists kept her sharp when rest eluded her. Cordelia felt a well of gratitude for her handmaidens, smiling at the envoys she was sharing tea with. They would have pounced on even the smallest hint of weakness. Ashurans of the sixth citizenship tier were notoriously cutthroat.

"The matter of partition will need to be addressed in writing sooner or later, Your Most Serene Highness," the tanned young man said.

Ahirom Seneqart, his name was. He was a frequent patron of the pleasure house nearest to the palace, and quite loquacious after sharing a bed with nubile young men. Never less than two. A man of great appetites, this one. Cordelia, as the ruling Princess of Salia, had naturally inherited the ancient web of informants that counted every madam and bawd in the capital. It was ancient Proceran custom to sift through the pillow-talk of foreign envoys to better outwit them.

"You are most correct, Sitter Ahirom," the First Prince said.

No coquettish smile for this one. His tastes ran exclusively to the other sex, if his spending habits were any indication. Instead she sipped daintily at her cup – an Ashuran leaf from Smyrna, as a courtesy – before setting down the porcelain.

"Yet it strikes me as premature to set in stone such terms before the end of the crusade has come in sight," she continued. "I have long admired the methods of the people of Ashur, who ever choose steady deliberation over hasty mistakes."

"The people of Ashur have deliberated over this matter, First Prince," Ahirom's grim-faced companion replied. "The conclusion is being presented to you."

The other speaker for the committee assigned the task of overseeing the Thalassocracy's actions within the Grand Alliance. A woman, this one, and in Cordelia's opinion quite the incompetent. Sitter Adonia had quite the imposing presence, tall and well-proportioned with long dark hair going down to the small of her back. She'd been a fleet commander of some renown, before rising two tiers in the wake of her crushing of a small armada of corsairs form the Tideless Isle. Quite good with a cutlass, allegedly, but in matters of diplomacy she was the proverbial stone hitting the glass house. She'd been appointed to the committee as a voice for the fleets, Cordelia reminded herself. She was not meant to be a proper envoy, merely the eyes of Ashur's soldiery in the Grand Alliance.

"It was my understanding that Thalassina has yet to be breached," Cordelia said, keeping her pleasant smile. "And that High Admiral Hadast's glorious victory at Nok was followed by a withdrawal."

A polite way to remind the jackals that requesting that the Wasteland's only two ports be ceded to Ashur after the conquest of the Empire was somewhat laughable considering the Ashurans had yet to establish any significant presence on the ground. The raids from the coast had to be costing Malicia quite a bit, but they were only that – costly. The Empire still had nearly all its legions in the field, and the sack of Nok had evidently failed to trigger a war of usurpation.

"Let me be clearer," Sitter Adonia said bluntly. "There will be no repeat of the crusader kingdoms. That method of dismantling Praes has failed. The Thalassocracy agrees with the Dominion's proposal of forced deportation. When this is implemented, it is only natural for Ashur to inherit the coastal lands of Praes. No other are fit to hold them."

Cordelia sipped at her tea in silence, eyeing Sitter Ahirom and his uncomfortable look. The implication that the other two signatories of the Grand Alliance would force Procer to agree to certain terms after the Tenth Crusade was impolitical to speak, even if it might be true in essence. Sitter Adonia had failed to mention, naturally, that the Levantines were not all behind that deportation proposal. A significant portion of the Majilis was arguing for the more moderate position of Praes being purged of its aristocracy and portioned into small Alliance protectorates. A few were arguing for outright massacre, but they had yet to gain any real support. Thank the Gods for that.

"My fellow sitter meant no slight, Most Serene Highness," Sitter Ahirom said, smiling embarrassedly. "Ashur remains committed to all treaties signed, and would never seek to influence the decisions of the Alliance in an unseemly manner. We merely request that the Principate begin to consider the shape of the crusade's aftermath."

"A most reasonable request," Cordelia mildly said. "Yet a full session of the Highest Assembly is not feasible to call with so many princes and princesses warring far from Salia. A treaty of this magnitude would require more than two thirds of the Assembly to be present and acquiescent, without any surrogate casting. You may rest assured, however, that I will raise the matter with the appropriate parties to prepare the grounds."

"There's no need to play coy, First Prince," Sitter Adonia sneered. "We understand how these matters proceed. The committee is willing to recommend to Magon Hadast that the Red Flower Vales, along with Ankou and all attendant lands, be recognized as a natural extension of the Principate."

It had been a very long time, Cordelia thought, since anyone had tried to bribe her with such open contempt. Setting aside that any occupation of Callowan land would turn into a brutal grind of constant banditry and rebellions – they were, for the Heavens' sake, a people that *prided* themselves on inheriting grudges from generation to generation – Cordelia had absolutely no intention

of annexing any part of Callow. Would she split it into several kingdoms? Absolutely. It was necessary to ensure that the Black Queen's surviving partisans would not be able to mount any significant bid for power until her memory had faded among the populace and could no longer serve as an effective rallying cry. There were already separatist currents within the region, anyway. The northern baronies were near a kingdom of their own, the Duchy of Daoine was independent even when it bothered to pretend otherwise, and most the south had remained under aristocratic rule until mere years ago: the people there, unlike those who'd lived for decades under Imperial governors, had never entirely abandoned the old Callowan way of life. In the face of the insolent sitter's gaffe, Cordelia allowed displeasure to touch her face for the first time since they'd begun this audience. She cocked an eyebrow and glanced at the other Ashuran.

"An interesting position," she said, a mite coldly, "for the Thalassocracy to take. I am not in the habit of carelessly disposing of lands, nor do I take kindly to attempted *bribes*."

The man looked like he'd plunged his hand into a brazier, and the look her sent at his colleague promised a hard conversation.

"My fellow sitter misspoke, Most Serene Highness," he said. "It appears the coldness of these lands had inflicted her with some manner of fever. Please forget anything that was said."

"I am saddened to hear that the weather has left Sitter Adonia indisposed," Cordelia said pleasantly. "Perhaps she should be allowed to rest, I simply could not bear to be responsible for the ill-health of a treasured ally."

The woman looked furious, but after locking eyes with the other envoy she bit her tongue.

"We would not impose on your patience any longer, First Prince," the man said. "Yet before we take our leave, might I raise a small matter?"

Cordelia debated instructing them to pass the request along to one of her officials as a polite chiding for the utter lack of manners Adonia had offered, but after a moment decided against it. Best to have Sitter Ahirom owe her a small favour instead. He was more malleable clay than most among his committee, and holding the debt without ever calling it in would make him more hesitant to contradict her in sessions where the Levantines were in attendance.

"It would be my pleasure," she said, demurely inclining her head.

Ahirom's smile was rueful. He knew very well what he'd just surrendered.

"A delegation of Speakers from the homeland has recently arrived in the city," he said, if she hadn't known they were coming months before they ever came in sight of Salia. "They mean to consult with the House of Light on some matter of theology. Might I trouble you for the throne's permission?"

The blonde Lycaonese brought the teacup to her lips, mind spinning. This was, in truth, something of an offered courtesy. She did not have the authority to forbid Proceran priests from holding council with the Ashuran cultists. Yet granting official permission would change the nature of the sessions held. It

might become an official conclave, however unlikely such an affair was to take place – the Speakers were mystics prone to speaking in riddles, and had no patience for the many scriptures and theologies of the House of Light. In truth, the council would take place whatever she said. Best to give sanction, and in hosting the event on palace grounds ensure she had eyes and ears at the proceedings. If they turned to one of the many Salian cathedrals instead, inserting agents would be a tricky affair to accomplish without ruffling the feathers of the priests.

"You have it, of course," Cordelia smiled. "It is but a small matter, Sitter Ahirom. I will naturally arrange accommodations, for I would not slight the famous sage-priests of Ashur."

She set the affair aside, after the sitter left. She would keep an eye on the proceedings to ensure that whatever priestly squabble emerge did not threaten to spill over into Grand Alliance, but there were more pressing matters to see to. The Levantines were making noises about it being a breach of terms for their hosts to protect Proceran lands instead of taking the war to the Wasteland, ignoring the fact that they'd been asked to march on a *Praesi* army led by the Empress' two finest generals, and she needed to convince the Princess of Tenerife she still had the full support of the throne without committing any more troops to the border with the League. Agnes sent for her just before nightfall. Cordelia did not hurry in a manner that would be unseemly, but immediately set aside any duties that were not essential. The moon was out when she joined her cousin in the palace gardens.

"Woe, Cordelia," the Augur said. "Woe to the north and to the south. Sit and listen, before it is too late."

Chapter 38

All According To (Redux)

> "It is said that on the eve of the Maddened Fields, the Tyrant Theodosius consulted with the many Delosi soothsayers among his host. He asked them if he would find victory or defeat, should he give battle at dawn as he intended. The Delosi squabbled among themselves for hours, until the eldest among them looked the Tyrant in the eyes and spoke his answer: Yes."
>
> Extract from 'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

I woke up, which was somewhat worrying considering I did not remember going to sleep. My fingers clasped the knife under my pillow even as my eyes opened, and with all the stunning majesty owed to my rank came flailing out of the sheets half naked with a blade in hand. It was somewhat embarrassing when I found myself completely alone in my palatial bedroom. Making a very dignified cape out of my bedsheets I took a wary look around and found nothing unusual – ah, save for one detail. There was sphere of misty ice on the stone table still strewn with papers we'd been using for planning. That hadn't been there... Shit, what was the last thing I could remember? Walking out of the Garden of Crowns, then I drew a blank. And my head was pounding, had I gotten drunk last night? Hells, could I still *have* hangovers? It'd be just like Winter to take out half the fun of drinking and leave me with the worst part, but I couldn't think of another time I'd had such a brutal headache. I'd had them once in a blue moon before I became the Squire and the Gods saw fit to relieve me of my monthlies – one of the few things for which I might actually owe thanks to Below for – but even then they'd been rare.

Had I been in a fight, then? I carefully checked my head for wounds and found no obvious ones. I did, however, stumble across what appeared to be granite coming out of the spot where my spine joined my skull. I swore on the fucking Hells, if Archer had gotten me wasted and talked me into some kind of pissing contest, oh Gods no it couldn't be that. The stone didn't wiggle at all

when I pressed on it but I could feel it going deep into my head. Some kind of cylinder? Yeah, not even Indrani would have been on board for that. I dropped my nifty cape but kept the knife, because this was still Keter. Padding softly across the floor I neared the frozen sphere and immediately notice this was my own work. For one, it was much colder than ice was supposed to be. And though the surface was misting and weeping, there was no puddle of water around it as there would be if it'd been melting for a few hours. That had fae bullshit written all over it. I leant over and wiped away the surface, eyes narrowing when I found there were objects inside. Cards, by the looks of it. Three of them, over each other with room in between. I couldn't quite make out the one furthest in, so I picked up the globe to turn it over.

It remained stuck to the table, as if nailed to it. Frowning, I tugged harder only to hastily stop when I heard a crack from the stone supports beneath. I checked under and found the base of the table had a sharp little fissure going through it. Shit, I thought, setting down the knife. Maybe if I pretended it'd never happened Athal would be too polite to point it out. I decided not to patch it up with ice, since it'd essentially be admitting I was responsible and the kingdom's coffers were running low even without having to pay for whatever fortune an antique Keteran table was worth. So, the sphere had been made so it couldn't be removed. Presumably, there was another way to get at the cards. I was already started on bad ideas for the days, so I might as well try to shove my hand in and see what happened.

"Gods that's cold," I hissed, as my fingers went straight in.

I fished the top card out and shook out the wetness, which apparently wasn't making the ink on it run. Was that from Indrani's deck? The Page of Cups stared back with his little smirk, but the interesting part was what'd been written on the card. No one else in the Woe had cursive this horrid, so it was clearly my own.

It was you.

So, I'd screwed with my own mind instead of having it done to me. That was... good?

Ask about Isabella's deception. Don't force the cards, you savage.

Ah, Past Catherine had evidently decided to be a smug bitch about this. Fuck her and her cryptic riddles. I flipped the card and found another few words.

Skein. Thief of – that was probably meant to be a star, but I wasn't exactly an artist. Shoddy work, Past Catherine, you could have asked Hakram for help. And, to end it, *Spellblade.*

Named, evidently. The Thief was supposed to be keeping an eye on this very palace, though if I'd encountered her since King Edward's warning I had no memory of it. I did not even need to know what this plan was to already know it was terrible.

PS, fuck you Future Catherine stars are hard to draw.

I'd have to ask Masego how feasible it was to arrange a ritual so I could go back and deck myself in the face. Who knew, maybe I already had and that was why she was being such a cranky asshole about the whole thing. I got the other two cards out, but they were encased in black ice. Bearing my worst enemy's instructions in mind, I didn't try to force them open. The working seemed to be have been tied off, anyway. The power within the ice was slowly trickling away, though one of them would run out long before the other. I left them on the table and got dressed. I'd helpfully – wait, no, that was too neatly folded so probably Hakram – left clothes atop the dresser last night. A green and silver tunic, with trousers of the same make. My plate was nowhere in sight, but what looked like Indrani's spare set of chain mail was waiting next to my boots. That was... unusual. The time where a full suit of plate had slowed me down had ended around when I'd become strong enough to accidentally break tables. Which I had not in this particular place, for the record. Archer was taking the fall for that if anyone asked. I clasped the Mantle of Woe around my shoulders and idly ran a metaphorical chain that bound Diabolist to it, finding it already taut. She was nowhere close, then, and given the lack of windows in my room following the chain's direction told me nothing about where she'd gone.

I was among the first to wake, but not the first. Vivienne was already glaring down at a cup of tea, a half-finished pastry in her plate. No servants in sight, though the table was bursting with a morning banquet. I touched the cards in the inner pocket of my cloak, right beneath my pipe and wakeleaf stash, and plopped myself down next to her.

"So, I don't know if you're aware," I said, reaching for what looked like fresh bread. "But I think we tried to get clever right last night."

"There was playing card nailed to my bedpost when I woke up," Thief admitted. "It told me to look in my bag when Hakram joins us."

"Can you, uh, remember anything from yesterday afternoon or after?" I asked.

She eyed me cautiously.

"Skein," she said. "Prophecy by spun thread. It's all I was told I could say."

"So there's a seer on the board," I mused.

That did explain why apparently whatever the plan was it had to be kept secret even from us. Maybe they could only predict through conscious decisions? Black had theorized that was the Augur's weakness, in Procer. Also that she didn't always control what she saw, but that tended to be a staple of oracle Names. What the Gods believed was important and what mortals did were not necessarily the same thing.

"If I asked you about Isabella's deception, would it mean anything to you?" I asked.

Vivienne's brow rose.

"Nothing," she said.

Way to be specific, Past Catherine. I'd finished buttering my bread and was struggling to drip honey on it without spilling when Masego joined us. My eyes

widened when he came in sight, which was mildly ironic considering the reason they did: one of the glass orbs that served as his own was missing.

"Hierophant," I delicately said. "I don't know if you've noticed, but-"

"I don't want to talk about it," Masego grunted.

He reached for the pot of tea, missing it by half an inch. Huh. I *had* wondered about his depth perception nowadays. Vivienne kindly poured him a cup and he settled into his seat, casting half a baleful glare at the world.

"So, can you see through the missing-"

He muttered in the arcane tongue and my breakfast caught fire. That twat, I'd just gotten it the way I liked it. I put out the flames with a twist of Winter, but now it was all soggy and disgusting.

"Fine, be that way," I said. "I was just worrying for you."

"I know where you stash your wakeleaf," he warned me.

That was a grave threat, and with the elegance of a tried diplomat I changed the subject.

"I don't suppose anyone knows where Diabolist is," I asked.

"No idea," Vivienne admitted. "Masego?"

"I am going to drink this cup of tea," Hierophant announced. "And greatly savour the accompanying silence. Shatter that dream at your peril."

Vivienne discretely covered her face before I could catch her smiling, wily veteran that she was. Hierophant finished his cup in the quiet, broken only when Hakram finally joined us.

"Isabella's deception," I said as he strolled into the hall. "Ring a bell?"

"Good morning, Catherine," he said amusedly.

"Don't you give me lip," I said. "We can't know who came up with this mess, but we *can* be sure we wouldn't have gone ahead without your agreement. As far as I'm concerned, this is entirely on you until proven otherwise."

"She's taking to the works of queenship rather well, isn't she?" Vivienne told the orc.

"Give it a few years and my Name will become the Scapegoat," Hakram gravelled. "It does ring a bell, Cat. It refers to Isabella the Mad's scheme when she fought Theodosius as the Maddened Fields."

I finished buttering my second bit of bread, casting a wary eye at Hierophant.

"I'm listening," I said. "Elaborate."

"Theodosius was said to have soothsayers, or more likely a great deal of spies," Adjutant continued, grabbing a seat at my side. "So General Isabella secretly gave her commanders wildly differing plans to carry out during the battle. She turned it into an axiom, when she wrote her book after retirement. 'The heart of warfare is deception. Therefore, the generals who can deceive even themselves are invincible.' "

I sighed. So we were now taking operational advice from a woman whose moniker was *the Mad*. Lovely. What were the odds that there were actually several plans and most of them were false? Godsdamned me. I glanced at

Vivienne, who was hiding away something in her palm with her other hand. Right, she'd been told to take out a card from her 'bag' when Hakram arrived, hadn't she? She crumpled the card.

"Now," she said.

Hierophant rose to his feet without warning, and flared with power as he barked an incantation. There were six doors to the dining hall. Every single one of them closed, glimmering with light.

"Domain, Catherine," he said.

I bit into my bread. Didn't get much out of the taste and even less nourishment, but the texture was nice. Melted in the mouth. Even as I chewed, I opened the floodgates and Winter came out to play. The darkness fell like a curtain over all the world. I felt the small bundles of warmth that were the Woe as everything froze with an ugly snapping sound, and herded the worst of it away from them. They still shivered. Our visitor was granted no such protection. Flesh hardened, bones shattered and the Thief of Stars went still. She spoke not a word, but in the darkness above a constellation of stars was birthed. The King's Crown, I thought. Back home they said it was an auspicious sign for the rulers of Callow. I swallowed and waited. Was it an aspect? Probably. Or at least the remnants of one. But in the end a thief was a thief, and I was the Sovereign of Moonless Night. I had all the time in the world, here. A dozen eternities passed, and one by one the stars winked out.

Winter devoured everything, given enough time.

When the darkness left, the Revenant was revealed to our sight. Shivering, Masego wove binding sorceries around her through hushed whispers as I eyed the frozen remnants of my breakfast with distaste. So much for that. Within my cloak one of the cards shattered, the casing's unmaking accelerated by the touch of my domain. I took it out, and found my writing spread across the Four of Pentacles.

Do you have the Thief?

There were two bundles of words beneath the question.

Yes, Zeze breaks first rune.

No, find Archer.

I flipped it and found a single word on the other side.

Lark.

Enlightening stuff, Past Catherine. Good work, you riddling bag of crazy. What the hells had I learned about the Skein that made this elaborate a plan seem like a good idea? Everything I'd been taught about scheming screamed that multiple steps were a recipe for failure.

"I woke up with a list of questions on the Six of Swords," Hakram said. "I assume she is the one I need to ask."

I put back the card and frowned. Well, it wasn't like interrogating one of us would help. We'd screwed with our own memories.

"Masego, you need to break the first rune," I said.

Hierophant's lone eye swivelled towards me.

"The artefact in your head," he said. "I had wondered the purpose of it. Everyone else has a spell instead, but I suppose you would not so easily be enchanted."

"We shoved a magic stone into my skull," I said, quite uncomfortable at the notion. "Oh Gods. That won't have any ill-effects, will it?"

"Your brain is mostly decorative," Hierophant assured me.

"Could have told you *that*," Vivienne murmured.

I was going to start keeping count of her instances of sedition, I decided. Probably not a list, since she'd absolutely steal it, but there had to be a way.

"Just don't blow up my skull, Zeze," I sighed. "I'm not sure it'd grow back."

His lips thinned.

"If you'd just let me-"

"We have a rule, Masego," I said patiently. "What is that rule?"

"We don't vivisect friends," he muttered mulishly. "Even when we could learn the *most interesting things* from it."

He padded over and without any warning placed his palm against the back of my head.

"Oh," he said. "That is skilfully-"

–

"There's a Revenant overseeing every palace," I told the others. "If my source is to be believed, ours is the Thief of Stars."

"That is a much snappier Name than Vivi's," Indrani noted. "Have we considered trading in? This outfit needs fresh blood. Corpse. Eh, you know what I mean."

I met Hakram's eyes across the table. Idly, he shuffled Archer's deck of cards though the game they'd played before Thief and I returned was long abandoned.

"Nothing we can do about that," I said. "Especially if the Skein really is guiding all of them."

I very carefully did not begin to ponder how we might catch her, even though she would need to be at least temporarily removed from the board if we were to have any chance of success. Chaos was our only best tool here. To cheat an oracle, you had to cheat yourself. We would need a touchstone, but also a way to multiply and scatter the possible trails. And, to tip it all over, a blindfolded blade. I turned to Diabolist.

"Akua," I said. "I never thought I'd say this, but I need you to scheme."

The smile on her lips was less than reassuring.

–

"-Catherine," Vivienne said.

My eyes rolled back into their proper place.

"I'm here," I said, brushing away her hand. "This is… going according to plan, maybe? I think Hakram needs to ask her the questions. She's part of this, one way or another."

"You'll need to unfreeze her mouth first," Adjutant said.

I rolled my shoulder, more out of habit than need, and turned my gaze to the Thief of Stars. Like King Edward she looked almost alive. Quite a bit younger than him, too. Tanned, leathery skin and sun-bleached blond hair in a single tress going down her back. I did not recognize the cut or cloth of her short-sleeved tunic, though admittedly that meant little. Exerting my will, I freed her jaws and tongue without a word.

"You people are the worst," the Thief of Stars said in garbled Chantant.

Ugh, Proceran. Just my luck.

"Still fresh and exciting to us," Vivienne drawled in Lower Miezan. "Hakram?"

Looming over her small form, the orc cleared his throat.

"What does Threefold Reflection mean?" he asked.

"If I were not bound, I would have taken your eyes by now," the Revenant conversationally said. "It's one thing to be bound here, another to suffer your tender attentions *twice*. I do have my pride."

My eyes narrowed.

"We've done this before," I said.

"I can see why you're the leader," she said. "Your wits are truly peerless."

"Masego," I said. "I'm not sure how to phrase this delicately, but-"

Without replying he traced a pair of runes out of red light and the Thief of Stars hissed.

"You little Wasteland twat," she said.

"Compelling truth is not objectively possible by sorcery," Hierophant said. "But this should compel her to answer and forbid her from consciously speaking something she knows to be false."

"What does Threefold Reflection mean?" Hakram patiently repeated.

"There are three overlain palaces," the Revenant snarled. "The thresholds meld."

"How many Praesi delegates are there?" Adjutant continued.

"Forty-three," she said.

"Where is Archer of the Woe?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

Why had he asked that? No, the important part was why that'd been a question. If we'd needed to know where Indrani was right now, it'd be written on a card. So that couldn't be the point. If us having that information wasn't the point, then most likely the question was meant to establish she didn't have that information either. That must matter, to some extent. Did the Skein need that knowledge to predict us? The memory Masego had freed had involved thinking we needed a touchstone. Archer wasn't who I'd pick for something like that, but maybe that was the point. *Akua's still missing*, I thought. Too many parts were still unknown to have a proper guess.

"Is the Empress currently within the Threefold Reflection?" Hakram asked.

"Yes," the Thief of Stars said. "Gods, you could at least change the questions."

I hummed. So, same questions. We'd meant for us to have the same information we got from her last time. So we'd make the same plan out of them? That was a chancy roll of the dice.

"That was all the questions," Adjutant told us. "It seems unwise to simply leave her here, if we are to act now."

"That one's mine to solve," Thief noted. "No card, mind you, but it's the obvious solution."

She got up and laid a hand on the Revenant's arm. Nothing happened. Vivienne sighed.

"**Hold**," she said.

While the sight of the undead vanishing was interesting in its own way, it was Hakram's body-wide twitch that took my attention. He winced, and I recognized from the look on his face the signs of a dawning headache.

"Well, I know what we need to do," he said. "We're going to find Athal, and then we're going to start a fire."

Chapter 39

Hakram's Plan

> "My dear prince, why would I settle for merely being on the right side of history when I could be on all sides of it instead?"
>
> Extract from the minutes of the Conference of the Blessed Isle, between the Shining Prince Harry Alban and Dread Emperor Traitorous

Black had once told me that people could get used to nearly anything, if it happened regularly for long enough. It'd been while we were having one of our evening lessons in Ater, talking of the many reasons why there'd never been a serious attempt by the Tower to forbid diabolism across the Wasteland. It was one of those little truths he enjoyed that seemed vague but ended up relevant surprisingly often. To demonstrate: arson. No matter what rumours Robber kept spreading, I didn't actually enjoy setting things on fire. Sure, it was one of the most frequently used tools in my arsenal even if it did have the nasty tendency of collateral damage. But it wasn't, like, my first resort. There'd even been a time where'd I'd been somewhat conflicted at the notion of dropping goblinfire on the head of the latest Named, army, entity – I supposed with the Tenth Crusade in full swing I was due to add 'continental coalition' to the list – that was after my head on a pike. Not without reason, either. When you tossed a match onto goblinfire, the closest thing there was to control available was *damage* control. Sadly, as I helped Vivienne pour oil on a wooden frame, I was forced to admit that I had gotten used to arson. It was just one of those things. I still wasn't an advocate of tactically setting fire to things, mind you, unlike your average sapper. I was, if anything, lukewarm to the notion.

"You look like you're trying to convince yourself of something very hard," Thief noted.

"I'm just saying it's disingenuous to call me a pyromaniac when I have actual pyromaniacs in my employ," I told her. "It trivializes the word to use it like that. Is that really so hard to understand?"

The other woman cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm going to pretend you never said that," she informed me. "And hope Hakram fixes whatever is wrong with your. . . "

She paused.

". . . everything," she finally said. "What's wrong with your everything."

"Just pour the godsdamned oil," I sighed. "I still don't understand why we can't just have Masego wizard it, but let's be generous and assume there's a reason."

Setting fire to a palace that was mostly marble was fairly tricky, but we had it mostly under control. The walls might be stone, but the largest rooms all had crisscrossing wooden beams beneath the rafters to hang tapestries and decorations from. Vivienne had climbed her way up, but I wasn't in the mood for wall-climbing in chain mail so instead I'd reached for Winter and spread a ramp of ice that took me there. Hakram had insisted that there be at least three different sources for the fire, so we'd rinsed and repeated twice before seeing to this particular dining hall. We'd yet to run into a single white-robed servant, which was a little odd. Had we told them to clear out last night? It wasn't like our breakfast table would have appeared out of thin air. Thief emptied the remnants of her jug and wiped her hands on her leathers, disappearing the empty receptacle without a word. I didn't know if there was a limit to how much her 'bag' could hold, but if there was she'd never spoken of it. Considering she'd once dropped a fleet of barges in the way of the Fifteenth, I supposed it would take a truly spectacular amount of knick-knacks to take up all of that space. And that was without even considering that at some point she'd stolen the sun.

"It's done," she said, eyeing her still-wet fingers with irritation.

"We'll still need to actually light them," I noted.

"Athal first, allegedly," she said, and without any ceremony leapt down to the floor.

She managed that landing in perfect silence, to my mild envy. If I did that it'd sound like I was running around with a dozen rings of keys. I slid down the ramp smoothly, though in truth that had more to do with my shaping of the ice than any skill on my part. Hard to fall down the stairs when you controlled where they were. The ramp shattered into shards behind me and I brushed off a few pieces from my shoulder.

"Think Hakram found him yet?" I asked.

"He's got the aspect for it," Vivienne shrugged. "I'm more interested in why we're starting a fire in the first place."

"Smoke will be visible from outside," I said. "Could be to draw the patrols."

"We could have moved quietly instead," the dark-haired thief pointed out.

"Not so sure about that," I mused. "Mind you, we can sort of manage quiet. But against a seer? As long as the patrols are out there, a single message is all it takes for them to be in our way."

"That assumes they're all coming into the palace," Vivienne said. "The Binds, at least, are sapient. It would be an elementary mistake."

"We don't really know how they function, Vivienne," I pointed out. "It might be that the Dead King gave them the order to check on disturbances and they literally can't disobey him regardless of context."

"Guesswork will only take us in circles," she sighed. "Let's find Hakram. One assumes he knows the next step in this cavalcade of merriment."

We ran into Hierophant first, as it happened. He'd been weaving spells at the other two bonfires, just small spurts of flame that'd get the blaze started after long enough had passed. His mood had not improved since breakfast, and he merely grunted at us on his way to the hall we'd just left.

"Nice to see you too, Zeze," I called out as he cleared the corner.

I wasn't a fool. I'd waited until he could no longer aim easily at my wakeleaf. Not even fifteen minutes we found Hakram navigating the corridors with Athal at his side, the dark-haired Host looking rather harried. Had he been sleeping?

"Great Majesty, honoured guest," the man greeted us, bowing low. "I was told you had need of my services?"

"It will wait until Hierophant has joined us," Adjutant gravelled.

I did not gainsay him, since I had no idea where we were going from here.

"I have a question or two for you, until then," I told the pale man. "Did we happen to speak last night?"

He blinked in surprised.

"Indeed, Great Majesty," he said. "You were wondering as to the steps the Crown took to assure your safety within these walls."

Well, that was ominous.

"Anything in, uh, particular?" I probed.

"You were quite curious as to the nature of the measures that would be taken in the face of a natural disaster, such as an earthquake or a fire," Athal told me. "Do you not remember this, honoured one?"

"I've had a lot on my mind," I muttered.

Most of which I did not remember, apparently. So the fire had a payoff beyond just serving as a distraction, probably. Before I could think of a way to delicately ask what, in a pure hypothetical, would happen if the Silent Palace caught fire, Hierophant joined us. Masego took one look at us, hid his hand behind his back, and I felt a small flare of sorcery.

"Lord Hierophant," Athal said, bowing once more.

"The palace caught fire, Host," he said.

The dark-haired servant blinked.

"*How*?" he asked, aghast. "*When*?"

I clapped him on the shoulder.

"Listen," I said. "Don't worry about it. Those sound like details above our pay grade."

"Are you not a queen, Great Majesty?" he said in a strangled voice.

"And, as a queen, I'm deciding this is above my pay grade," I sagely said. "Obviously we can't stay in a palace that's on fire. That'd be dangerous. So were are we headed, my good man?"

"There is a passage to outside," Athal said. "I will lead you through it, if it please you."

He sounded a little dazed. Well, I didn't blame him. Lots of that going around today. I checked on the last card in my cloak, but the ice casing had yet to melt. Blindly forward it was, then. The Host led us deeper into the palace until we reached the end of a corridor with two opposite-leading doors. Instead of taking one of them, Athal took out a small knife from his sleeve and cut his palm open before smearing his blood on the wall. Even as runes lit up I rose an eyebrow. Why did people always go for the palm? It made it so much harder to hold things afterwards, and it wasn't like hand blood was better than forearm blood or anything. What had previously appeared to be a wall vanished into nothingness, leaving only the blood-red runes hanging in the air for a few moments before they vanished as well. Masego let out a noise that implied he now felt like sticking around and having a closer look so I discretely kicked him in the shin.

"There was no need for that," he whispered.

"Maybe not," I replied just as low. "But someone screwed with my breakfast this morning so I'm all moody now."

He half-glared at me, which to be frank was more amusing than intimidating.

"If you would follow me, honoured guests," Athal said.

The threshold led into what appeared to be a dark tunnel, though the moment the Host stepped within magelights began to light in sequence. By the look of them, we were headed down. Thief went still at my side.

"I forgot something in my rooms," she announced. "Go ahead, I'll catch up."

I cast her a look but she shook her head. So it'd been nothing she could share.

"Honoured one," the dark-haired man said. "Please do not. The guards will be arriving soon, and smother the flames long before anything within your rooms can be lost."

I blinked and Thief was gone.

"She's hard of hearing," I told Athal. "And not very bright. Also, frequently mutinous. I'm going to start a ledger."

The last part had no bearing on the situation, but I felt like it needed to be said for posterity's sake.

"I must find her," the Host gravely said. "It would be a grave breach of hospitality if-"

"Oh, look," I said. "Adjutant is sick."

There was a heartbeat of silence. Hakram coughed into his fist.

"I am," he loyally said.

"It's the fire," I told Athal. "Orcs are notoriously afraid of it. We have to get him out of here before it gets worse."

I felt Masego twitch and shot him a glare. *Now is not the time to be a pedant, Zeze. Do not contradict my blatant lies.*

"I feel faint," the orc added dutifully. "Like a dove. A dove that is sick."

Way to sell it, Hakram. Glad to have you on the team.

"We must make haste, then," Athal said.

He looked like he very much wanted to express scepticism but was too polite to do as much. Ah, the joys of diplomacy. We followed him as he briskly led us into the tunnel, and I pretended not to hear Masego mutter *no they are not* under his breath. The entire passage felt drenched in sorcery to my senses, heavily enough I could barely sense the magelights when I stood next to them. The Host apparently knew the way by rote, as when a crossroads appeared he led us down the left corridor without hesitation. All right, so Thief was going after something. She'd been necessary to the first part of this mess because we'd needed her to put the Thief of Stars into her bag – she'd also given Masego the signal to close the doors, but we could have given that card to anyone. Diabolist and Archer were still out there up to the Gods knew what, and since there'd been no instructions to seek them most likely the next part could be accomplished by Adjutant, Hierophant and myself alone. The Empress was still inside her palace, so that was likely where we should be headed when we emerged from this. Alone? Ah, that mighe have been the whole point of Thief splitting off: that Athal would have to go after her, leaving us to our own devices after opening the passage.

The thing was, a plan with this many moving parts wasn't going to work. I should have known that last night, but I'd gone ahead with it anyway – which either meant the plan wasn't supposed to work, or that I was missing something. All pithy Imperial quotes about planning aside, there were too many points of failure for even the sections of this I was presuming had worked as intended. What if the Thief of Stars had taken a card, or added a fake one? To play the rebel's advocate, it might be that the Revenant wasn't supposed to meddle in our affairs. Only listen in on our conversations. But that was quite the mighty *if*, and it was making a lot of assumptions about the agency of all involved. It had to be about the Skein, one way or another. Why else screw with our own memories? Thief had called what they did 'prophecy by spun thread'.

I'd mentally considered the enemy Revenant to be an oracle, but it didn't quite sound right. No seer was omniscient, even those who also bore a Name, and the source of their visions tended to give a hint about their limitations. For example, as a heroine the Augur most likely took her cues from Above. I had a nifty little booklet from Black that was half speculation half observation on the nature of her abilities, which were terrifyingly broad in scope but also as fatally flawed as those of any other Named. The Eyes were convinced her limit was that she could only foresee things that were already in motion – or, as my teacher had put it, *initiated decisions chains*. It was why the Empire's once-frequent assassination attempts on the First Prince and some of the most key supporters of her regime had always failed. So the Empire had managed to catch diplomatic couriers and even the odd tactical coup by leaving agents in place with no instructions except taking advantage of presented opportunities.

Except it wasn't actually that clean-cut, because there'd been an attempt on the First Prince's life that fell under those characteristics two months after Second Liesse and it had failed. Black had amended the theory to note that it was feasible the Augur could make two kinds of prophecies.

The first would be those she got handed by Above, about whatever Above cared at that time. Those were likely to be significantly more detailed, but also significantly rarer. The Heavens couldn't repeatedly put their finger to the scales like that without enabling the opposition to do the same – and more than that, the Augur was only one of many tools. They wouldn't send her a flock of eagles or whatever she read the future through when whatever that prediction was about could be handled just as well by a hero they'd sent in to take care of it. If the likes of Black and Malicia had been handing out prophecies to their people, I had no doubt that trusted underling or not there would have been predictions given anyway. Just to be sure. But heroes were already supposed to win, weren't they? Unless that loss was part of the story, meant to pay off down the line. And the whole point of the wager known as Creation was that the Gods didn't know which of them would win their pissing contest. Black had a whole half-page of scribbles going on about how the Augur could likely read 'Fate' as seen by the Heavens but couldn't go beyond those bounds, making heroes a blind spot of sorts, but in my opinion it was simpler than that: the Augur's Role was that of a coordinator. She got the message out so troops would stand at the right place at the right time, but she wasn't supposed to actually guarantee a victory.

She couldn't, I suspected. If the game was that blatantly rigged, Below would have whelped out an oracle of their own to check her by now. Above had to toe the line.

The second kind of prophecies would be those she sought out herself. It was on record that the Augur had wielded visions to help her cousin the First Prince win that same title on the battlefield against the other contenders in the Proceran civil war. It was dubious the Heavens have much of a shit about Procerans slaughtering each other – if they had, a hero would have popped out to take care of the mess – so the Augur herself had likely sought out those visions. And that was the interesting part, because then she was acting as a person and not a messenger – which meant she was fallible. Odds were that was when the decision chain limit came into play, but that was too low a bar. She couldn't be impossibly hard to interpret, since she was capable of passing coherent military information along to the Iron Prince that was usable for campaigning. That left the oldest of mortal failings: she only had one set of eyes, metaphorical or not. If she had to seek out the vision about something, it followed she couldn't see all things at all times. And that meant she could be fooled, if she was looking at the wrong unfolding plot. It wasn't a flawless solution, as Black had written in his notes.

If the failure was too large in scope, she'd likely receive one of the first kind of visions to make up for it. Coordinator, yes, but perhaps also a safeguard.

Sadly, I did not have one of foremost namelore experts alive and an Empire's worth of informants to help me puzzle out how the Skein's future-telling abilities worked. We had something of an idea, evidently, because Vivienne had given me a hint earlier. *How* we'd learned that was impossible to puzzle out at the moment, so I'd set the question aside to pick at later. What I wanted to know, as a stepping stone, was whether the Skein had been a hero or a villain while alive – or even one of those Named that floated somewhere in between, cast into one Role or the other depending on the story they came in touch with. Neutral was the wrong word for it: there could be no such thing as neutrality in the Game of the Gods. Even objecting to the rules was to take a side, in its own way. I was jarred out of my thoughts when we finally reached the end of the passage, Athal smearing blood on solid stone to open it up once more. We emerged into daylight, the four of us blinking until we'd acclimated again.

I glanced around curiously. We weren't on the wide avenues surrounding the Hall of the Dead. No, this was the base of a rampart. The innermost set of it, right before the ring of palaces. Near the outer edge of the Garden of Crowns, though I could see our target from where we stood. The Threefold Reflection, as King Edward had implied, was a pyramid of faded white stone that held so much sorcery it was almost visible to the naked eye.

"Guards will soon come to guide you to a temporary resting place," the dark-haired Host informed us. "I must return to find the Lady Thief, but I implore you to remain here until your escorts arrive."

I smiled and put my hand over my heart.

"On my teacher's honour," I said.

A flicker of amusement passed through the man's eyes. Yeah, I wouldn't have bought that in his place either.

"May your hours be fruitful, Great Majesty," Athal said, and after a bow went back into the dark.

The three of us stood there for a moment, and eventually I cleared my throat.

"Hakram?" I asked.

"My health has improved, thank you," the orc drily said.

I rolled my eyes.

"I assume you remember the plan," I said.

"I do," Adjutant agreed. "I must proceed alone. The pyramid has three gates, leading into three different intertwined palaces. You are to take the western gate, while I take the southern one."

"We're splitting up," I slowly said. "Oh Hells. This just keeps getting better."

"Look on the bright side, Cat," Adjutant grinned, ivory fangs bared. "How can they foil our master plan if even *we* don't know our master plan?"

I much preferred, I decided, being on the other side of that brand of quips.

Chapter 40

Vivienne's Plan

> "A battle is, in my experience, a handful of hours where one of two generals proceeds to destroy his own army while the other simply happens to be there."
>
> Prince Fernando of Salamans

For anyone to come up with the underlying principles of the Threefold Reflection and to then decide someone should live in there required an impressive amount of dementia, so in a sense it made sense that Neshamah had built the damned thing. I'd seen drawing of the pyramids that could be found in northern Praes – Wolof, in particular, was known for them – but this one was of a decidedly different bent. Stone instead of mud, for a start, but where the Soninke works tended to be broad and gently sloped this one was tall and unpleasantly angular. I suspected if the monuments were going to have anything in common, it was the amount of bodies buried beneath them. Akua had been vague about the rituals that still took place by the city she'd once been in line to inherit, but Masego had been disturbingly informative about the most infamous atrocities associated with the place. It took a particular kind of people to decide it was a going idea to sacrifice a few thousand people to make something called a 'plague cauldron'. The only reason I was pretty sure Diabolist had never been taken down there to murder puppies as a kid was that after the whole 'murder your childhood friend' party it'd feel like a bit of a let-down.

I pulled the Mantle of Woe closer around my shoulders after running a metaphysical finger down the chain binding Akua. Still pulled taut. Wherever she was, it wasn't anywhere close. After Hakram informed us we were meant to split the group in two to take different doors – the western gate for Masego and I, while it was the southern one for him – we'd wasted no time dawdling around. A trail of smoke going up into the sky of Keter made it plain that our work there had not been discreet, which I assumed to be the point. Hierophant was not in a chatty mood as we passed through the colonnades surrounding the pyramid proper at a brisk pace. Whether it was our piecemeal fiasco of

a plan or the loss of an eye that had him in a tiff I didn't know, but either way I couldn't blame him. There was much I despised about what I'd become through Winter, but I would feel... naked without the eldritch senses of my constructed body. I'd come to take what they told me for granted: tasting heat and fear, hearing beyond that even of a Named. That muted sense I had of the intents of others, which straddled the line between sorcerous boon and a flood of details put together I would never have noticed without Winter. All that, and I was only a bastard child of Arcadia.

No wonder the fae had reputation for exquisite machinations, if they had all these senses and more: it was like being the only person in a pitch-black room that could see in the dark.

"Our gate," Hierophant said, breaking our stretch of silence.

I nodded slowly. It'd been too much to hope, I supposed, that it would be wide open for us. Instead the two slabs of sun-drenched stone remained tightly shut, which was admittedly something of a problem.

"I'm guessing hammering through isn't an option," I half-guessed.

"We have no hammer," Masego reminded me gently. "And even should we employ sorcery, it would be loud and difficult to open this through force."

Figured. It wasn't like the Dead King bothered to build on anything but titanic scale.

"Maybe there's a magic word," I suggested.

The dark-skinned man inclined his head in concession.

"Neshamah," he tried.

Nothing. Yeah, I supposed it would be a little like a Callowan wizard using 'revenge' as the key to a magic door. There probably *had* been at least one that embarrassingly lame in the past, but it wasn't common practice.

"Could you-" I began, but he raised his hand.

"Quiet," he murmured.

His brow creased, and after a moment he traced a rune against his temple. A dot of light came out, and in a streak came before the both of us. It changed into an illusionary card, the Eight of Wands, and on the projection a few words in Old Miezan were written. I winced. I'd never paid as close attention as I should to those lessons – I'd had a deal with another girl where I traded her translations for my history essays – and I was horribly rusty besides.

"Translation?" I asked.

"Sparrow," Masego said. "And I am instructing myself to remove the third rune from your artefact."

"That's skipping one," I noted. "Last time was the first."

"It occurs to me," Hierophant, "that the confusion here might be the purpose instead of a mistake."

Yeah, I'd come to that conclusion myself a while back. I wouldn't work off anything this messy and complex if I had a feasible alternative, which once more took me back to the soothsaying Revenant awaiting us inside: the Skein. I was starting to get the impression we were not playing shatranj with the oracle

so much as tossing handfuls of pebbles at the board and hoping one ended up tipping over the king.

"That aside," I said. "Did you engrave a card into your own head?"

"Several," Masego replied. "It seems wiser than keeping them at hand, where they could be witnessed. Aunt Eudokia always told me that treason is the one thing one should leave no paper trail for."

That might be true, but it didn't make him any less of a show-off.

"All right, Zeze," I said. "Magic fingers it is."

With a put-upon sigh he rested his palm against the back of my head and-

–

"The palace isn't a maze," Vivienne said, elbows on the table. "Not in the traditional sense. There's a chamber at the centre with a guiding artefact."

Akua got it before any of us, which did not strike me as odd. Masego might boast a broader base of sorcerous knowledge, but these kind of traps were as milk and honey to Praesi highborn.

"Three palaces, reflections in overlap," she said. "The artefact is able to decide which threshold connects to which across the span entire."

"It looks like three wheels on a stick," the other Callowan said. "With pieces of twine hanging through, tying places together."

The look on Masego's face at the revelation was pure avarice. Godsdamnit. His mild magpie tendencies when it came to artefacts had only increased since we'd technically robbed the Sahelians of their most precious artefact. In our defence, Akua had been in the box and it'd been just lying there. Finders keepers, right?

"You found the room at the centre," Hakram said, cutting at the heart of the matter.

Vivienne nodded.

"More accurately, I was allowed to," she said.

"You ran into the guarding Revenant," I guessed.

"He's called the Skein," the dark-haired woman said. "And before getting deeper into that, I have a few questions for our foreign experts. What can you tell me about ratlings?"

Indrani set down her cup, looking interested for the first time in a while.

"The species?" she said. "Nothing too deep. Lycaonese call them 'the Plague' because they never stop being hungry. Just like a disease, they'll wipe out everything even if it starves them down the line."

"Said hunger has been speculated to be caused by their unusual physiology," Masego added. "They never cease growing. They are birthed as bipedal rodents smaller than humans, and have no theoretical check on how large they can be save for each other. The Chain of Hunger is so named because ratlings will promptly devour each other when there are no other sources of immediate sustenance. Father believes the entire species is a kind of strange Demiurgian phenomenon of unknown purpose."

My eyes turned to Akua, who'd been standing a little outside of the Woe's circle this entire time.

"Wolofite records agree with the Lord Warlock," she said. "There are scrolls dating back to Triumphant's campaign in the region that speak of a time in the life of their kind called the 'metamorphosis', where ratlings will transition from bipedal beings of observed sapience into the animalistic large creatures called the Ancient Ones. The few of those beings that manage to consume enough quickly enough while in that state are speculated to undergo a second metamorphosis into the elusive Horned Lords of lore."

"Those Horned Lords," Vivienne said. "Back on two feet, about sixty feet high, antler-like pairs spouting from the head, capable of human speech?"

"That's how the the Lady described them," Indrani slowly said. "Save for the antlers."

"Well," Vivienne smiled ruefully. "We have something of a problem, then."

–

"- Burning Hells," I exhaled. "Horned Lord, Hierophant. There's one of those with seer powers sitting pretty in the middle of the pyramid just waiting to fuck with us through a maze-making control artefact."

"A ratling?" Masego mused. "Unusual. I suppose the Kingdom of the Dead does have a border with their kind. Do you have the magic word for the gates?"

I sighed.

"Apparently that wasn't judged a high priority," I said. "What had you reaching for the card, anyway? Any help coming from there?"

"I was instructed not to tell," Hierophant replied absent-mindedly. "I suppose attempting to jostle the wards open is in order, lacking alternative."

"That's feasible?" I asked.

"Quickly?" he said. "No. But a few hours of protracted study should do the trick. It won't take more than half a day."

"We're in a bit of a hurry," I said. "... I think."

"This is not the kind of miracle I am proficient with, Catherine," he replied peevishly.

Bickering would have been a nice way to let off the steam, but a notion reached the surface of my mind, quicksilver-swift.

"Sparrow," I spoke at the gate.

The heartbeat of silence that followed echoed with unspoken mockery. Ah, well, it'd been worth a try.

"Sparrow," Masego said as well, only in Ashkaran.

Without a sound, the stone slabs withdrew into the threshold.

"I would have thought of that eventually," I said, not the defensive in the slightest.

"I note you did not give a precise time limit for that statement," the one-eyed mage said.

If I stepped on his foot going into the Threefold Reflection, well, no one could prove it wasn't an accident.

—

I'd considered it a safe assumption that the creepy dimensionally layered murder pyramid would look like a dusty crypt inside, but apparently I'd done the Dead King disservice: it was actually pretty pleasant in here. Sunlight, fresh air, and the decorations were both tasteful and welcoming. The unfortunate part was that 'here' was becoming a vaguer term every time we turned a corner of passed a door.

"Left," Hierophant decided.

"We literally just took a right," I said.

"In another palace, yes," Masego agreed. "This is... not that one."

After spending a solid sixty heartbeats in awe of the fact that it was natural sunlight and not torches or magelights that lit up the entrance hall of the Threefold Reflection – I'd checked out for most of the ensuing mutterings about 'fixed temporal sliver' and 'redistribution arrays' – he'd gotten his shit together and begun to serve as my personal navigator. Since the entire place was a madman's nightmare of wards and thresholds, it was possible for him to follow along the metaphorical dotted lines of the wards and get a bare bones idea of the layout of the palace. Took him a little bit and required concentration, but it was reliable. Unfortunately, it was also useless: the image he got from that trick was only a single layer of the reflection, which meant the moment we left that layer we were lost again. And he couldn't see the whole pyramid with that trick, either, which had bitten us in the ass swiftly. We were probably past the outer reaches of the palace, but the gates we'd come in through were nowhere in sight. Which went some way in explaining why it'd been so easy to get in, I supposed.

It was inside the palace that the Skein would find us easiest to contain. So why had we wandered in blindly? This was Hakram's plan we were following, and as far as I could see it could only end in failure. More than that, we were wasting precious time. Malicia and her minions might already be out of the pyramid for all I knew.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," I said, then winced at the accidental pun.

I looked up at the ceiling.

"Skein, right?" I said. "I'm assuming you're listening, because let's be honest – if *I* were in your place, I'd want a good look at the people I was screwing with. Don't suppose we could cut out the whole maze thing and have a civilized conversation instead?"

No answer.

"Cat," Masego said quietly.

He was gesturing towards a door we'd passed earlier, and my brow rose. The room behind that threshold – a cosy little antechamber with fainting couches – had gone dark. An invitation? Only one way to find out. I made sure Hierophant was right next to me when I passed the threshold, as I had this entire time. The last thing I wanted was to get separated from my erstwhile navigator. My reflexes were quick, but not quite quick enough not to fall. Winter

came eagerly when called and a platform of ice formed beneath my feet, though I almost slid off it when I had to bend over to catch Masego by the scruff of the neck.

"Impressive workmanship," Hierophant noted, lone eye looking down through his own body.

I glanced as well, and forced myself to count up to ten in silence. A spike pit. And actual fucking pit filled with sharp metal spikes. There were even faded skeletons at the bottom, which was really the spine in the wine as far as I was concerned. It wasn't like they hadn't had literal centuries to clean that up, I just knew they'd left them there as a statement.

"A simple no would have sufficed," I complained, looking upwards.

There was solid ground on the other side of the pit, and with a careful flex of my legs I leapt up here. No threshold there, at least. Jumping from pit to pit would have been a bit much even by fucking Keteran standards. I dropped Masego back on his feet fairly awkwardly, given that I was holding him by the neck and he had a few feet on me.

"Quiet bubble," I ordered.

The ward went up, and we tried to position ourselves in a way that would make it difficult to read our lips. Changed to speaking Kharsum as well, it wasn't nearly as well known as Lower Miezan or the other Imperial languages.

"This isn't working," I told Hierophant. "We need a change of tactics. Your source that you can't talk about, can they be any help?"

"I assume they already would have intervened if they could," Masego said.

Was that implying the conversation went only one way, or was I reading too much into it? That was the pain in this plan – well, one of them – I never could be sure whether I was supposed to try to figure out something or not. I shifted on my feet, though not because of what he'd said. His silence ward wasn't the same he'd used when we were inside the Silent Palace, it had no physical component to it. Not that it had helped in the slightest against the Thief of Stars that we knew of. It wasn't a sound so much as a moving of air that I caught, a difference in pressure. My hand snapped out and I caught a wriggling form by throat as I smoothly unsheathed my sword.

"Morning, Catherine," Vivienne said, snapping into sight.

I dropped her with a sigh.

"I could have stabbed you, Thief," I said.

"My aspect is the only reason we managed to run into each other," she said. "He shunts me off at will otherwise. If I remain hidden in his vision of the future, he cannot predict where I am. It is no absolute. The rest of the gambit was presuming you'd irritate the Skein enough for him to send you here eventually."

I raised an eyebrow at both things being implied – first, that Hide could ward her from whatever means the Skein used to see us. Second, that she'd *expected* us to end up here.

"This was planned," I said.

"Sparrow," she replied in Kharsum. "Owl done, we on my tack now."

Her hold on the language was bare bones, but Hakram had taught her enough we could have a functional conversation. My eyes narrowed. The second card had the word *Lark* written on the back, without an explanation. I'd taken it to mean an adventure or a bit of fun, because Past Catherine had a terrible sense of humour, but it was also a kind of bird wasn't it? Owl didn't ring a bell in the slightest, but it might be there were at least three plans unfolding. And Vivienne had told us we were now on 'her tack'. *Skein. Prophecy by spun thread. One set of eyes*. Were we... Gods, that would mean building at least three interconnected towers. The sheer complexity of that – we did have Akua, though. Who was still missing. And the first rune-bound memory had me considering the need for a touchstone, which might very well be her. It was a good thing I almost never got headaches these days, I decided.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked. "Your aspect can't cover all three of us."

"Not need to," Vivienne smiled thinly. "We hunted Malicia presently. Now by, the Skein have her on way out here."

"By now," I corrected.

She rolled her eyes.

"He can still move us between the layers so we never run into her," I said.

"Before answer. Object limits has," she said. "Can not bridge same layer. Can not go nowhere."

"How do you know this?" Masego asked.

"Skein," she said. "Flaw. Single speaker, must. Memory back."

Monologue, I thought. She'd met the ratling before, that much I'd already suspected, but this explained quite a bit. He must have been a villain while alive. Which still begged the question of why the Dead King had put someone in charge of the Threefold Reflection he had to know would give us a solution to the riddle if pressed. He could have put a hero instead, and they might not have been as skilled at using the artefact but they wouldn't have *talked* either. It felt like he was willingly giving us an opportunity to kill Malicia if we were sharp enough, and while that fit with my suspicions this was a test it also had me wary. Guessing at the Hidden Horror's motives was a dangerous game at the best of times, which these were most definitely not.

"That's useful and all, but how do we find Malicia through the shunts?" I asked.

"No go layer," she smiled. "Centre artefact. I saw."

She tapped Masego's belly.

"Extract," she said.

And she tapped mine.

"Gate," she continued. "No inside. Cold iron protect. Close."

I frowned.

"Then why didn't we gate directly from the Silent Palace?" I asked.

"You can't thread through different pieces of fabric," Masego said. "I would presume that chamber to be removed from Creation. This layer, however, is directly connected."

Then why hadn't we done that the moment we entered the pyramid? Why leave a necessary piece of information, the location of the central chamber, solely in the hand of – I winced at the sudden spike of pain from my forehead.

"Second rune is flaring," Hierophant murmured.

So we hadn't. Masego and I had just never thought of it, and Vivienne being here was a contingency. She must have entered through a place that guaranteed she'd be here to wait for us – evidently she'd found it the first time she came here, she must have moved the exact same way. What if the Skein had never sent us here and we'd never thought of it? Mhm. There might be other contingencies, then. Hakram was now unaccounted for as well as the other two. And I still had a card encased. Fine, then, maybe we'd been surprisingly cautious in our recklessness. I clenched my fingers and reached for Winter.

Time to pay the Skein a visit.

Chapter 41

Akua's Plan

> "Note: though 'fell down the stairs' is common fate for Praesi highborn, further study demonstrate this is not nearly as lethal as the records would imply. It took, on average, five repeats to reliably kill someone in this manner. The tiger pit remains most practical."
>
> Dread Emperor Malignant II, the Particularly Petty

I honestly wasn't sure this was Arcadia.

It didn't make sense for us to have ended up elsewhere, since it wasn't like a fae mantle was a key to the infinity of dimensions in existence, but this didn't look like Arcadia in the slightest. Or at least no part of it I'd ever seen. There was a sky, though grey and with no obvious source of light hanging, and ground to walk on. Which was where it got unusual, because it wasn't earth our feet were on. Or even stone. It was some sort of hard black material that felt like softer obsidian. I could handle that much, truth be told, but the shifting shapes of the same material around us were where I drew the line.

"Go into Arcadia, she said," I mused. "It'll be a shortcut, she said."

"I never actually said that," Thief muttered back.

Without us ever moving an inch what had been the sky above our heads now seemed perpendicular to where we stood, like we'd moved from the ground to standing glued on the side of a house looking upwards. I closed my eyes and opened them, which got me situated again but also had me gritting my teeth. Because I could have sworn I was now standing on the ground, but the sky was to my left and what had been the ground before was now a massive wall. One that was slowly disassembling into smaller blocks, shifting into staggeringly large structures.

"Creational laws run particularly thin here," Hierophant noted, standing at my side like nothing was wrong. "Arcadia always did have the tendency to work on say-so, but gravity here seems purely a matter of perspective."

"A geometry trap," I complained. "That's just great."

My tutors *had* said I'd regret not taking those lessons more seriously.

"Shall we proceed?" Masego suggested.

"You're sure this is Arcadia?" I asked.

"I have valid reasons to believe so," he replied. "Do you not feel the nascent gate at the end?"

"I do," I said. "It's far on the other side of the... ground. Wall. You know what I mean."

"Clutter," Vivienne helpfully contributed, pointing there.

Clutter was about right. There were stairs, not all of them making sense at the angle I currently stood on, but also a myriad other structures: columns and bridges, towers and plateaus and things I'd never seen before. Not too far away I could see a spiral of blocks that only made sense if you went up with a certain perspective and down with another.

"I'm guessing that's the way, through," I sighed. "Let's get a move on."

We began our walk through insanity, taking a diagonal bridge across nothingness that put us on... top? Top seemed about right, of things. I leapt down at what was the foundation of a tower going the wrong way, landing smoothly. Vivienne followed a heartbeat later.

"I hesitate to ask," she said. "But what exactly ensures that we don't fall off, Masego?"

He managed a crouch landing, but would have tripped if I didn't catch him by the shoulder.

"Strictly speaking," he said, "nothing."

I would not get vertigo on solid ground, I told myself. Gods, I would not get vertigo on solid ground.

"Reality could be said to function by the fiat of the Gods, in large part," Hierophant continued. "This particular place seems to extend that privilege to anyone within it."

"I should have stolen more grappling hooks," Vivienne muttered under her breath.

We moved on to a vaguely sinister promenade of black columns, which went some way in quieting the instincts in the back of my head screaming I was about to fall and die, but then we took stairs that went down through the ground and the shift of perspective had me under the impression I was hanging from the basement of this nightmare through only my feet.

"Remember when the worst we had to worry about was William stabbing things with an angel feather?" I said. "And Vivienne hilariously failing to knife Hakram."

"Not all of us took so well to killing as you," Thief replied defensively.

I wondered what it said about us as a group that we frequently ragged on Vivienne failing to murder my closest friend in the world. Even Akua got it on it, these days, and for an unrepentant monster she had a *scathing* way with sarcasm. Masego patted Thief's shoulder.

"It's all right, Vivienne," he consoled her. "No one thinks less of you for it. You're very good at other crimes."

"I – you – thank you, Masego," she finally got out, soundly defeated.

Truly, of all the terrible sorceries at Hierophant's command the most dangerous was his occasional bouts of disarming sincerity. Aside from headaches and the occasional existential crisis, this little detour into the worst of wonderlands did not prove to be a major hindrance. Slowed us down some, but less than I would have expected. The shifting structures were fairly accommodating. It was maybe half an hour before we got in sight of where I knew the still unformed exit gate to be awaiting us. Atop a massive cube of blocks, which meant I had to leap onto the side and think very hard about why I wouldn't slide off the way common sense dictated I would. Masego had absolutely no trouble with it, the fucker. He'd taken to this place like a fish to water. I got off my knees, having learned from our earlier travels to shield my face so it wouldn't stack straight into the new 'ground'.

"Straight across, then we shift plane again," Hierophant said. "This was quite the interesting interlude. Would it be incriminating to thank the Dead King for widening my horizons, do you think?"

"Yes," I replied immediately.

"Very," Vivienne added.

"That's a shame," the one-eyed mage murmured. "Perhaps just a gift, then. I would not want to be an ingrate."

"He's the immemorial undead overlord of a hellscape and a half, Zeze," I said. "I don't think fresh apple bread and decent wine are ever really in order with him."

"Maybe the soul of a minor irritant, bound to an ironically chosen household object," he mused. "I still have a book on Imperial court etiquette somewhere, there are customs to things like this."

"We'll talk about it later," I lied. "For now, let's-"

The ground opened up beneath us. No, it parted. Like waves, hollowing out the thick of what had been a cube and forming an eggshell ceiling above us from the blocks. The broad ramp that emerged led straight to where I could feel the portal awaiting to be born. With the small hitch of there being man sitting on a throne to the right of it, legs crossed.

"And it was going so well," Vivienne said.

I winced.

"We've had talks about saying things like that, Thief," I said.

"Well, he's already there," she said. "How could it-"

I covered her mouth with my hand.

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," I growled. "Hierophant, assume hostile."

"I always do when you're there," he cheerfully replied.

That'd been perhaps a little too honest for comfort,t but I couldn't deny the general accuracy of the assessment. I released Vivienne and took point, hand on the pommel of my sword. Thief to the side, Hierophant in the back with room to manoeuver. Fae eyes meant I did not have to wait for anything as

pedestrian as actually being closer before having a better look at the stranger. It was not human. Pale and thin and angular, like it'd been cut out of marble to look like a human with a too-large chisel. Whether it was a man or a woman I could not tell, or even if the label would apply. It wore a long sleeved-shirt of white satin, trousers of the same and had not bothered with boots. Its eyes were narrow and dark, and I found nothing but scorn within when they met my own. It was the ears that gave it away: long and sharp. Almost triangular at the tip.

"Elf," I quietly said.

Vivienne inhaled sharply. Masego did not waste his breath on an answer, immediately beginning to layer protective spells around himself. Was it a Revenant? I had no heartbeat I could hear, but that might be normal with elves for all I knew. If it was this deep in Keter, even through Arcadia, then I'd assume it was undead until proven otherwise. The elf did not move even as we approached. Was negotiation an option?

"Good morning," I said.

It stared at us, completely still. I kind of hoped deep down that it was just an intimidating corpse and we'd have a good chuckle about it afterwards, but I doubted my luck was that good. I could see no weapon in its hand or anywhere near. Close quarters fighter?

"Don't mean to interrupt," I said with a winning smile. "But we're lost, and I was hoping to ask for directions."

The elf rose to its feet, still silent. Its hand snapped out, and before I could get so much as a get word out there was a *rip*. For a heartbeat I thought it was tearing away at the fabric of this half-world but it wasn't that, not exactly. Like it was ripping away an invisible screen, it tore out the gate I had yet to make. Dropping it on the ground afterwards, it eyed us patiently. I could no longer feel the way out of this place.

Not to be overly dramatic, but that was something of a problem.

"I take it that's a no," I said. "We'll, uh, just be on our way then."

A ring of golden flames formed around the elf's hands and burned with blinding brightness until they... solidified. Formed into a long single-edge sword of what I might have thought to be simple bronze, had I not seen its making.

"Spellblade," I grimaced. "That was a little more literal than I'd expected."

"You may kill yourself now," the Revenant told us in a voice utterly devoid of inflection. "It will spare me the filth."

All heart, this one.

"Would you consider us to 'proper fucked' at the moment?" Thief asked lightly.

"Well, if you want to get all technical about it," I muttered back.

She passed behind me, and after moving my hand pressed what felt like a card into it. There was a thin covering of ice over it, and a sliver of will was all it took to shatter it. Another exertion had three reflective pieces of ice growing

on my armour at the proper angles, and I took a look at what was written on it without ever taking my eyes fully off the Spellblade. On the Queen of Wands two bundles of writing awaited.

Skein.

Not the most pressing danger at the moment, but whatever.

Don't. If Hakram is there, Swan. If not, Dove.

Fucking Hells, how many plans did we have?

Spellblade.

That was more like it. Past Catherine better astound me with her wisdom and foresight.

If Masego is there, Buzzard. If not, good luck.

I was officially not astounded by Past Catherine's wisdom and foresight. I flipped the card and found nothing on the back, so I crushed it.

"What was the trigger for that?" I asked Vivienne.

"Your handwriting, 'when proper fucked'," she replied. "Note it was not *if*."

"Buzzard," I replied. "Zeze?"

"A kind of bird," he kindly supplied. "Although…"

His fingers twitched and the word appeared in red letters in front of him.

The elf swung and in that exact same moment I lost an arm.

It'd been instinct that had me putting my arm in front of Hierophant. A vague sense of danger. The red letters vanished like smoke, four layers of wards on Masego broke like glass and he was violently thrown back even as my sword arm dropped to the ground. I'd formed another blade out of ice before my arm was done reforming and immediately made for the enemy. Thief had disappeared, thank the Gods. She wasn't cut out for brawls like this.

"You should have obeyed," the Revenant said tonelessly. "Irritating."

They swung again, almost casually, and when the instinct flared I ducked down without hesitation. The slope broke behind me even as my body bent forward while I ran down. Fuck, how had the Revenant done that? There'd been no flare or sorcery or anything, it'd felt like a perfectly normal swing of the sword. It stepped to the side, and impossibly that took it right to my left. Distance warping, maybe? It couldn't be teleportation, the sheer amount of power those spells required was insane. The first swing down towards my torso I followed. My footing shifted, I spun to the side and it was just out of the trajectory. Then the elf moved again, a lateral cut, and that one even my eyes failed to see. I had just enough time to guess at where the hit would land and cover myself in ice before I was blown away by a hundred horses kicking me together. The elf was behind me even while I sailed through the air, having simply *stepped* there, and I was entirely done with this. Winter howled.

A dozen spears of ice shot out of my back, avoided and parried without fail, but I twisted around and my feet landed on the platform I'd woven. I filled the space beneath me with ice and leapt down into it, passing through it like mist. I felt the edges shatter beneath a blow as I did and wove glamour even as I rolled out of the way. Two doppelganger spun out of me and I left another behind in a

crouch as I mimicked the stance of the others. The elf ripped through the last of the ice with a single hand, then simply struck the illusion left behind. Golden flames ate at my mail and I was smashed into the ground, biting my lip so I wouldn't scream. It was above me again a moment later, the entire glamour broken, and with a fluid shift of grip it came down towards the still burning wound on my chest point first.

"Fine," I grunted. "Be like that."

It wasn't like my organs actually mattered anymore. The sword went right through me, puncturing the blocks beneath. My hand clasped the burning spell blade, reforming my fingers as quickly as they turned to ashes, and I opened the floodgates. Ice and shade ate at the bronze-like material, spreading across it lightning-quick, and the elf abandoned the blade. A step had it withdrawing where it had first begun, silver light forming in rings around its hand. Change of weapon, huh? I wasn't allowing that so easily. Ice crept across the ground, encasing my feet, but all it took was a thought and it was dragging me along faster than I could have moved on my own. Two heartbeats and I was on him, just as the light turned into a blade.

"Three truths do I now reveal," Hierophant said.

The elf flicked the blade backwards and I ducked, feeling something powerful scythe through where my upper body had been. I extended forward, every muscle bending, and the pommel of my sword struck its chest. There was a sound like a crack of thunder, but it remained unmoved.

"First, that which I see is the mask worn by void," Hierophant said.

The elf kneed me in the belly, but I caught it with my free hand and ate the vicious impact with a grunt. It kicked me upwards into the air, blade already swinging, but I formed a handhold of ice and used it to kick its smug fucking face. It barely even noticed, until ice spikes grew beneath my foot. It angled its head back, just out of range, but with a twist of will I had them shoot out. While it ducked beneath I wove more ice out of the handhold and made it hammer my back so I'd smash into the Revenant. The silver blade flicked towards me, tearing through the ice I set in its path effortlessly, and with gritted teeth I formed a tentacle out of the ice trail behind me and had it drag me out of the way. The elf straightened up even as I landed.

"Second, in a world that is nothing there can be no partition," Hierophant said.

Change of tactics. Slugging it up close wasn't going my way. I stomped down and thick mist billowed forward in a tide. No doubt it could see through that, but so far it hadn't used more than one trick at a time. That should allow me to make a dent, if executed well. If felt the elf move through my working, and in that moment I struck. I opened a gate, right through its torso. If felt its skin shiver, but it was still whole. *Countered, but now I've got you.* I grasped the mist, sucked into into a spike, and hammered at the silver blade with it. It felt like… light. No, more than that. I felt fury well up in me, unbidden. *Moonlight*. Mist turned to shade and ate away at the blade like a drop of ink

in water. It was trying to burn me out, but I had the fucking power to spare. I brute forced it, Winter coursing through my veins, until the blade shattered.

"Third, if all is one then to master a grain of sand is to master all of Creation," Hierophant said.

"Enough," the elf said.

"Agreed," I smiled, and filled its goddamn mouth with ice.

It stiffened for a moment, and before it could finish cheating its way out of that I was on the Revenant. My sword carved into its side, shattering its way through the spine. There was a shiver of power, and if I'd been half a second slower I'd be dead. I stumbled back onto the ice, unseeing. The forward half of my body was just... gone. Winter was sluggish to react, as if shocked by the depth of what it had to reform. My eyes came back just in time to see a silver blade about to punch right through my forehead.

"Mine," Thief said, and snatched death and moonlight both.

She was gone the moment the word was finished. The elf grabbed me by the throat, but my mind was elsewhere. If half my body could just be formed out of Winter, what *was* I really? Lies and mirrors and the stubborn belief I was still a person. Maybe it was time to leave that delusion behind. I was a construct, and what had been made could be *unmade*. My flesh turned to mist around its fingers and I slipped out of its grasp before it could crush my windpipe. I heard Masego begin to speak and backed away.

"And so I act," Hierophant spoke conversationally, "wielding a blade of absence for higher purpose."

The ground shifted. Blocks collided against the Revenant, ripped out of the floor, and within that ever-growing cage it was forced into the air. There was another shiver, the shell disappearing as if by writ of some ancient god, but more filled the gap. That was as good an opening as I'd get. My instinct was to strike, but I'd not come here for a brawl. This was just a distraction. I remembered where the gate had first been ripped out, and with a steady exhaled made another one.

It opened into nothing.

"This is not great," I admitted.

I closed it with a flick of the wrist. Masego made his way to my side, panting, as the elf kept wrecking his ritual above us. That wasn't going to last much longer, it was going through blocks quicker than they gathered now that most the surface was gone.

"I think I lost the thread," I told Masego. "What can you do?"

He grimaced.

"I don't know," he admitted. "We've never-"

The gate opened again. Thief appeared at my side.

"Catherine?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"That wasn't me," I said.

A head popped through the opening.

"Do hurry," Akua Sahelian said with a pleasant smile.

Chapter 42

The Skein's Plan

> "Chaos is a ladder, Chancellor. It never goes quite where you need it to, and the rise is always more graceful than the descent."
>
> Dread Emperor Perfidious

Like proper villains, we put a magic gate between ourselves and the consequences of our actions before silently agreeing to pretend none of it had taken place. The Woe had taken to that part of villainy better than any other, truth be told. Probably didn't help that I was the closest thing Archer had to an authority figure in her life that wasn't *Ranger*, or that Hierophant had been raised to believe that repercussions were a thing that happened to people who didn't have family dinners involving the full roster of the Calamities. Seriously. I would be dishonest not to acknowledge that having Black cleaning up behind me for year hadn't, uh, encouraged me to display a perhaps disproportional amount of recklessness in my actions. But even at my worst there'd been an amount of calculation involved in those risks. In contrast, Thief had at some point robbed a Legion pay convoy and somehow expected to get away with it, while Diabolist had gone out of her way to personally piss off every single living villain with a higher body count than her. Well, before Liesse anyway. She'd murdered her way to the top of that list quick enough. It was telling that the closest thing we had to a steady hand around was Adjutant, and he'd rather famously gotten into a slugging match with a demon.

Gods, was Juniper the voice of sanity? She ate people, for fuck's sake. Well, corpses anyway, and she hadn't done it in a while that I knew of, but *still*.

"I have so many questions," I told Akua the moment the gate closed.

"Flammable and inflammable mean the same thing," she replied without missing a beat.

I paused.

"What?" I managed.

"I noticed you've been misusing the latter," Diabolist said with a beaming smile. "The word is actually derived from the Old Miezan verb *inflammare*,

which means 'to set on fire'."

Masego let out a noise of approval, the filthy traitor. Of course of all the Woe's habits the one Akua had to pick up was giving me lip in the middle of delicate life-and-death situations. 'Closing ranks in front of outsiders' had been too much to hope for, I supposed, but Merciless Gods I would have settled for 'prone to collateral damage we can't afford to pay for'. It wasn't like she didn't have a history. I made the decision that choking my only current source of insight on what was happening was unwise, which I thought was very queenly of me.

"Where are we?" I patiently asked.

"Before the gate to the central chamber," Akua said, inviting me to look behind her with an elegant gesture.

If you'd one sinister rune-engraved stone gate, you'd seen them all. This one was ridiculously large, but given the alleged size of the Skein that wasn't a surprise. Besides, this one didn't even have a terrifying face-shaped demon bound inside. Strictly small time compared to the Tower, that somehow-standing pile of horrors. I considered my next question carefully.

"How?" I finally said. "Just. . . "

I gestured to encompass Creation.

"*How*?"

"As a part of your mantle, she can draw on Winter to an extent if so allowed," Masego said.

"Yes, yes, we all knew that," I lied. "Not need to state the obvious, Masego. But here precisely?"

"The chain," Akua simply said.

Which bound her to me, or more accurately the Mantle of Woe, and to an extent Winter itself. That explained how she'd been able to open a gate towards my location, anyway. How had she even gotten here in the first place? The whole point of the Threefold Reflection was that it could be turned into an unsolvable maze at the drop of a hat.

"You used Winter, to make your gates," the shade reminded me. "Your works were known to me."

Setting aside the headache-inducing implications of that for later, I frowned. So she'd seen where I was planning to get out of Arcadia and gone there. Which told me why she was here, but not how she'd gotten there in the first place. I eyed her warily, since the question had been implied, but she did not speak again. More secrets. Exactly what we needed, at the moment.

"My eye, if you would," Masego stiffly asked.

Akua sketched a bow and produced the glass orb with a flourish of the wrist. My frown deepened.

"You've been running the ritual this whole time," I said. "He could see through his eye, you through his, and you sent him instructions through it."

"Cards," she agreed. "As I was instructed, though I did not always know the reasons why."

I passed a hand through my hair. Which, as I immediately remembered, had been formed out of Winter smoke and mirrors mere moments ago. There was no sweat matting the strands even after my extortions, which I was almost thankful for. The inhumanity of that was almost comforting, compared to the reminder that any sweat I'd feel would be a lie I told myself and my will enforced.

"We're on Buzzard, I take it," I said.

She nodded. I eyed the stone door.

"So now?" I probed.

"We enter," Diabolist said. "After the sixth rune in your head is disabled."

Skipping a few there, huh. That aside, Vivienne's card had given me the eloquent instructions of 'don't' when it came to the Skein, so it was worth asking her if-

"And Thief is gone," I said. "Please tell me someone else saw her get out of Arcadia."

Masego finished putting back his eye in the appropriate burnt-out socket, yet another reason to be thankful eating was now optional for me, and straightened up.

"I did as well," he said. "Though she disappeared within moments."

"And you didn't think that was worth mentioning?" I asked.

"I assumed there was a reason," he replied.

Yeah, that was today in a sentence wasn't it? Could hardly rake him over coals for that.

"Romance my brain, Zeze," I ordered with a sigh. "Let's get this cart back on the road before it catches fire. Again."

His hand rose, and immediate-

–

"He reads stories," Vivienne said.

"We can as well," Masego pointed out.

I intervened before that could turn into a proper bicker.

"So we come at him with a plan, he'll have seen it from beginning to end," I said.

"Essentially," she said, after flicking an irritated glance at the blind mage. "Though the interesting implication is that he can only 'read' a single story at a time. It is possible to fool him."

"Multiple schemes will be required," Akua mused. "With a degree of bridging between them. It would be ideal to begin on a scheme and move into another before the Skein can arrange for a point of failure."

"That means someone has to know enough of them to lead us to change tacks at critical moment," I noted. "Considering you can't really fight, Diabolist, it'll have to be you."

"She'll need to be fooled as well," Hakram spoke up. "Given more plans than we'll actually use and kept in the dark about which few options are really on the table."

"Go random," Indrani advised. "That always fucks with oracles."

Akua nodded in agreement.

"The rest of you will need to be kept ignorant of large swaths of what is planned," she added after. "Lest the moment you begin a plan the enemy be made aware of it."

"Masego, you can do memory blocks right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"An easy enough enchantment for all save you and Diabolist," he said. "Conditional triggers can be woven in, though no more than one per 'block'. Too high a degree of sophistication risks permanence, the human mind is a complex device."

"I don't like how complicated this is getting," I admitted. "But once you're wet, there's no reason not to swim."

"I don't follow," Masego said, brow creasing.

"We don't leave him to guess between a handful of plans," I said grimly. "We ***drown*** *him in them."*

–

-ly. Rude.

"So this is a stupid plan, but it's stupid on purpose," I said, rubbing my forehead. "That's comforting. You know, except for the part where we fail and die horribly."

"I was hoping we would avoid that," Hierophant gravely said.

"Yeah, well, you know what the Dead King put up on the gates into this place," I replied. "Fine, it's too late to run anyway. Akua, you got anything to add?"

She bowed smoothly.

"I was ordered," she said, "to fight as an extension of you, should it come to swords."

"Well, it's not like today has been a cornucopia of good decisions so far," I mused. "So what the Hells, let's give it a whirl. Zeze, get the door would you?"

With a deep grinding sound, the stone slabs parted.

"This is the part where I praise his efficiency," Akua announced. "Because misunderstandings and incompetent assessments are humorous."

Was it wrong that the one of the most horrifying things about the mass-murdering maddened shade of my former rival was that she was trying to develop a functional sense of humour? If so, Black had shown a lot more foresight than I'd thought back in that alley.

"In we go," I said, warily eyeing the darkness within. "Before I start debating whether it'd have been more reassuring to blow our way through."

Robber was, inarguably, a horrible influence. The ground wasn't stone, I knew that just from the feel of it under my boots. It wasn't even flat. It crunched. Didn't even need to glance down, the sound was easy enough to recognize: bones. Charming. The inside was pitch black save for a single well of light illuminating the artefact Thief had spoken of: three layered wooden

wheels on a stick, with pieces of string joining them haphazardly. She'd not mentioned, however, that every wheel was about as broad as I was tall. Hierophant followed behind me, and the grinding sound told me that-

"Yeah, so *that*'s not happening," I noted.

Ice bloomed in the way of the closing stone doors, shattering for the first few inches but eventually forcing them to a halt as I kept pouring power into the working. I was already standing inside a massive dark cavern filled with bones, there was no way I was letting the Skein keep us stuck inside. Speaking of, there was no sign of the Revenant.

"At least he's not waiting on a throne," I mused. "Those fights never seem to go well for us."

There were tall curved rib bones from something definitely not human serving as a sort of antechamber leading to the wheels, but that screamed 'trap' even more than the rest of this room.

"Hierophant?" I prompted.

"We can use them," Masego replied. "I can already glimpse them. Deep, but simple."

Good to know. Still didn't tell me where the Hells the undead rat was.

"Oh what a stroke of luck," I loudly said. "The Skein isn't here. I guess we'll just walk towards those wheels and-"

Sword clearing the scabbard in a heartbeat, I stabbed the bones beneath my feet and poured the howling might of Winter into the mess. Frost crept through the mass of bones, and my eyebrow rose when I realized how deep it actually went under us. At least sixty, seventy feet. Not trace of the Skein though.

"Catherine," Akua said.

I sighed.

"He's above us, isn't he?" I said.

The answer wasn't so much laughter as it was the quiet rumbling of the storm. A massive shape leapt down and bones were sent flying in every direction while I smoothly rose and fell into a guard. Hierophant, prudently, came to stand behind me. Diabolist was at my shoulder know, and all I felt from her was a hunter's patience. Furred body bending over the wheels and cutting through the light, the Skein watched us with a leering grin. He was large as Thief had said, but her short description had not done the Revenant justice. Thick dark fur covered a body that was almost humanoid, save for the long wormlike tail that came from its lower back, but it was the head that was discomforting to look at. We call their kind ratlings, but looking at that rotting leather it was a snake I thought of. The pale golden eyes with deep red gouges under them only deepened the impression. The two pairs of bone-like antlers ripping through the top of its head were wickedly sharp, even after what must have been centuries. A Horned Lord. Even Ranger considered the likes of that difficult to deal with, and when we'd come across that woman in Arcadia I'd felt like she could murder the lot of us in the span of a single breath. Not an

opponent I should take lightly. Not an opponent I should fight at all, if I could help it. Sadly, my mouth disagreed.

"So can we knock off the theatrics?" I asked. "Because, let's be honest here, Akua's probably more Evil than you are and if I told her to fetch my slippers she'd do it."

The creature's dry red tongue licked at fangs half the size of me.

"Take the wheel, lead the Empress to the orc," the Skein said, then cocked his head to the side. "Or. The Empress escapes, yet dies to a blade of stolen moonlight. Two paths."

"Well, I'm glad someone knows the plan," I mused. "Would you care to monologue about how we're going to fail?"

The Revenant laughed.

"Then you strike," he said. "Or. She strikes with you. Or. You flee. Tricky little things, skittering around, but you entered the maze. You did. Surrendered too many paths. No end remaining is fortunate."

I reached for the last card inside my cloak and my fingers came away wet. My hand rose.

"Just give me a moment," I asked.

The ancient abomination stilled. I got the sense he was somewhat taken aback. Last card, huh. I slipped it out and angled it so the light well the Revenant was across would make it clearer. The Queen of Swords.

You have an invisible crossbow.

Written diagonally, across the whole thing. I flipped it. Nothing on the other side. Seriously, Past Catherine? That was the entire message? She might as well have just drawn herself flipping me the bird. What an asshole.

"Catherine?" Masego probed.

"If you were hoping for a solution," I said. "That was not it."

"It was pointless," the Skein said. "Seventeen stories? Pretty little tales, but you always end up here. No matter the path, the destination is the same."

Seventeen. Gods. There wasn't enough alcohol in all of Keter to justify that, and even worse I was pretty sure we'd planned this sober.

"Look," I said. "I'm with you on this one. This whole thing has been a debacle from start to finish, and the person responsible should be buried alive. We're on the same side, here."

The Revenant stilled again. Evidently, this was not unfolding as expected.

"You did this," he tried.

"That can't be, I don't remember it," I immediately denied.

I'd fought enough Praesi to know that sufficiently high station and blatant lies could get you out of nearly anything, if you played your cards right.

"We should look into it together," I told him. "Have you considered we might be getting framed? I'm just saying, this is a horrible plan. I could do better. It just doesn't add up."

"Does this actually ever work?" I heard Akua ask Masego in a whisper.

There was a beat.

"It got us into Skade," he eventually conceded.

"Are you trying to lie to an oracle?" the Skein said, by the sound of it genuinely offended.

"I would never dare lie to you," I lied. "You're obviously a… rat-person of highly discerning judgement. If you just get Malicia in here, I'm sure we can straighten all of this out."

"It's like watching a demon get loose," Akua murmured. "You know you should run, but you just *have* to look."

"You want me to bring the Empress here," the Revenant said. "The Empress that you are trying to kill."

"That's completely unrelated," I said, proceeding forward with greatly unwarranted assurance. "And hearsay besides. I'm as loyal to the Tower as any Praesi."

Assuming said Praesi was highborn, anyway.

"Did you truly expect this to succeed?" the Skein eventually asked.

"I've rolled the dice on worse odds," I admitted, perhaps a little too honestly.

While that was not a high point by any definition of the term, it definitely went downhill from there.

—

I'd learned several things today. First, elves were bullshit even when they were dead. I wasn't unaware that I didn't have a lot of room to talk when it came to recovering from wounds, but who the Hells just decided they were all right and had Creation agree like a drunker singer? Second, when the Lady of the Lake called a breed of foe 'hard fuckers' she meant 'how would someone even kill that thing if it wasn't already dead?'. I was now on my eighth sword, and beginning to appreciate why heroes always got handed some nifty legendary blade before they were sent into the meat grinder. I might as well have been trying to breach a wall swinging at it with a salmon. And, not, I grimly thought, even a large one. That was, sadly, not even in the top ten of my current problems. The Skein's jaw hung unhinged, gaping wide, and it closed only when the last of the darkness had been swallowed into it. There went my domain.

Which he had eaten, because that was a thing that could be done.

"It comes," Akua whispered into my ear.

Thank you, helpful collar fairy, I acidly thought. If I'd wanted a running fucking commentary, I'd have asked Black for a talking sword. I leapt onto a platform even as the Skein's bare fist collided with the bones beneath where I'd stood, immediately leaping onto another before the swing of his tail could catch me. I'd learned the hard way that I couldn't take a hit from the Revenant without spending precious moments rebuilding whatever passed for my spine these days.

"Burn," Hierophant said.

Ribbons of golden flame streaked across the dark cavern, folding around one of the Skein's limbs, but he turned and casually sucked the fire into his

open maw. The breath that spread was putrid, like something left to rot for so long the rot was all that was left. The Horned Lord flicked at glance at Masego, who stood atop a ring of bones surrounded by a pale globe of light, and without warning *moved*. Fuck. I took a running leap off my platform, then as the fall quickened my momentum called on my domain again. The brushstrokes of night came but twice before the Revenant lazily struck down right through them. The darkness dispersed like smoke and then the backlash hit. My eyes froze in their sockets, then shattered, and with a hoarse scream I dropped out of my controlled fall into a pile of bones.

"Move," Akua said.

I rolled to the side without thinking, and a massive impact close to me had me spinning back in the air. I reached for my face – was that a rib going through my cheek? – and forced the eyes to form quicker. Vision returned just in time to see the massive handful of claws headed my way. Flick of the wrist and ice sprouted on them, forming a long staff I caught by the side, and then the tail smashed me into the wall of this accursed place. There went my spine again. There really was not getting used to that, was there? I heard Masego bark out something in the mage tongue and dropped listlessly to the ground. Diabolist was there, red eyes and pleasant smile, helping me up.

"There was mention of fighting together," I said after spitting out a few of my teeth.

Akua Sahelian offered me her hand.

"Shall we?" she said.

Gods help me, but I took it.

Chapter 43

Masego's Plan

"Kings and shepherds fit in the same cook pot."

Orc saying

It was a difficult to describe. The power was still mine; it just wasn't shaped by my own hands. I could still feel it, span the ebb and flow and cuts, but the will behind was Akua Sahelian's. For the first thirty heartbeats it was horribly distracting, to fight while I had this... second line of thought going on in the back of my head, but soon enough I learned to ignore it. The need for control had always been the lid on the powers I'd stolen from Winter, hadn't it? It was a lesser surrender, the act of allowing Diabolist some manner of rule over it, but it was still a step towards that place I yet shied away from. Neshamah had called it apotheosis, and mused it to be the result of happenstance. I was not so certain, but I knew than if I reached the world I looked back to would be a very different place.

Winter sunk into the sea of bones like a great tree's roots, tainting and binding and made into pattern impossibly perfect by another's will.

My mind had brushed against the flow, and though it kept existing bereft of my attention my gaze no longer gave it clear definition. *Like watching without eyes*, I thought. It was not the kind of thought a human would understand. That I did, instinctively so, was certain to have a price down the line. I exhaled, sword in hand, and watched the Skein's muscles pull and shift. He was a dead thing, in the end, and Winter knew much of death. The Revenant was not of my own raising, but there was an... affinity there, now that I knew to look for it. Not a door into usurpation – in those eldritch struggles knowledge was always paramount, and compared to the likes of the Dead King I was a babe in the woods – but the ratling was not untouchable. Like me, he was a construct.

Those could always be broken, with the rights tools.

The muscle weaves beneath shoulder contracted, bent and though the Revenant angled his body to hide the tail I felt it shift. In, out. My breath came steady, an illusion imposed on myself for reassurance. Pretty ritual that it was, it served

its purpose. The Skein struck with inhuman swiftness, clawed hand shattering the remains like toys as it passed where I had been but moments earlier. No longer. What difference was there, between the ice I shaped and the stuff of my own body? Beneath the surface, absolutely nothing. The twin spider-like limbs that ripped out of the back of my plate and shifted to see me land on the Skein's extended arm made that bitter admission impossible to deny. Muscles shifted beneath me, the sweep of the tail abandoned as the Skein prioritized shaking me off. Lower leg inclined, and it followed that – there it went, the dip, but his very nature made me an oracle's bastard child.

Steel would do nothing against the ratling's eldritch hide and fur, but steel was just one of many tools at my fingertips. I tugged out a string of my domain, shaped it into a hook and carved into the Revenant's flesh even as he made to throw me off. It did all the work itself: the momentum had me swinging around his side, the hook of darkness slicing into his skin as I descended. The Skein let did not let out a sound. Did he even feel pain? No matter. I'd take him apart piece by piece, if that was what it took. I hung from the hook under his belly and hoisted myself up, spider legs born anew to hold me as I began climbing back up the side.

Power reflected into itself, a hall of mirrors containing a conflagration until it came out roaring like the great beasts of the First Dawn. Claws and fangs and wings and most of all eyes that were entirely Akua Sahelian's.

There disconnect between seeing the working unfold through Diabolist and my own body's senses hearing the thousands of bones come together with strings of shade and ice, rising a behemoth of a drake that collided against the Skein with a thunderous crash. Too many ears. Too many eyes. The spider limbs cracked and broke until I grit my teeth and forced them to shape anew.

"The whole world is the altar of the profane, both seeing and unseeing."

Hierophant's words rang loud and clear, though the undertone was made uncomfortably inhuman by the protective globe of ivory-like power protecting him. The Skein ripped through the neck of Diabolist's drake, devouring the power within, but I could feel her laugh and let loose the endless depths of Winter into his maw. I swung myself around with the limbs, landing on his lower back, and wrenched out the hook. A failure in imagination, this particular tool. Limited by my own thinking. I stole away more of my domain, gave it more useful shape. The arc of the bow was smooth, the string indistinguishable from it. The hook changed, shaped by a thought, and I anchored it somewhere hands could not reach. The Skein moved before I could loose. Abandoning the drake, he turned and massive fangs shone in half-light. There'd been the hint of a hint in the way his muscles moved. The ice limbs dug under the punctured hide and folded into themselves then outwards, impossibly lengthened, until I hung high in the air and away from his snapping jaws. With a hard grin, I loosed my arrow.

"Under this theology of disbelief, the scales bear the weight of nothingness and the the sum of all that is, finding them equal and equivalent."

Like a spool unwinding, my domain followed in the arrow's wake. The Skein ducked, impossibly knowing of the trajectory, but a flicker of will was all it took the have the projectile tearing downwards and straight into the crook of his neck. *I have you now, Horned Lord.* I reached and grabbed the other end of the thread, night-stuff coiling around my fingers, and dismissed the limbs. He would have moved before I dropped onto his back, but the fur glistened with cold and Diabolist emerged from it in glimmering ice.

"You drank too deep," Akua Sahelian chided, smiling in that same fearless way she had when she'd pitted her madness alone against the full might of the East.

Ice formed in restraining shackles around the Skein's limbs, and though he broke through them that moment was all it took for me to land. I shifted, spread my legs and pulled even as the arrowhead became an ugly root of darkness within its flesh. He fought me for a moment, but then the Revenant bent and I crouched to forced the other end of the thread into the flesh of his lower back. It spread without hesitation, forcing the whole creature's body into a warped arc as he failed to break the strength of my domain manifest.

"My hand is the sword of truth, denying the rot of entropy: 'lo and behold, the shade of Ruin falls upon you."

A shiver went through me as sorcery filled the entire cavern. I had felt the likes of this before, once. For a quick, fleeting moment. When Black had spoken a single word and wrecked Liesse like a castle of glass, a madman's will shattering all that displeased his sight. Hierophant had stolen an aspect, or at least an aspect's cast, and now wielded it like a hammer against the Revenant that sought to break us. The Skein screamed, this time. Limbs and flesh smashed, breaking apart from the inside and through the yell the ratling hissed a word.

"**Spool**."

I frowned, what/

I stood on the bones again, Akua helping me up, but her hand left mine quickly and she turned a burning glare on the Skein. The remnants of her drake were still lying half-broken, reeking of Winter, Masego was back under his Ivory Globe and my domain was whole. So was the Revenant, not a mark on him. All our successes erased in a heartbeat.

"Again," the Skein leered. "Teach me all your tricks, crawling things."

We hadn't even managed to kill it last time. And he'd still unmade it all, easy a waving a hand. Gods, how many times could he call on that aspect? Three, ten? As many times as he wanted?

"Interesting," Hierophant said. "You did not break the march of time so much as sever causality. Prune away events from a sequence that still theoretically exists."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Let's find out how many lives a rat can have."

"Our minds were left untouched," Diabolist noted. "As was his. In broader Creation such a working would have shattered him upon the wheel, from all

the cascade of innumerable events affected. The aspect was bastardized, made contingent to this place."

"It is a good cage," the Skein said. "You will not leave it."

"So we're playing shatranj," I said. "Across possibilities he can 'spool' back at any time."

"Alas," Masego said, tone amused, and the Ivory Globe winked out. "A mistake was made."

"You fail," the Skein told him. "Here? You always fail, again and again."

"You are not the only one who can learn," Hierophant said, and his glass eyes burned bright beneath the cloth. "And all you have earned from this is further **Ruin**."

I'd seen a lot of aspects over the last few years. Become familiar enough with the gifts of Named that I could be considered a discerning judge. William's Rise had been like a wellspring of harsh light from within, hollowing out his insides but removing every wound inflicted. Black's Destroy was like a bolt fired at Creation, a wilful removal of what my teacher wanted gone. Akua's Bind had been little more than an acknowledgement of her nature, the thirst for control deepened and formalized by the touch of the Gods. This was different. Masego had come into his Name standing defiant in the face of a sun that was not a sun, a godly thing that defied the laws of Creation and human comprehension, and it had shaped what he'd become. *Usher of Mysteries, Vivisector of Miracles*. Witness had been the outgrowth of the former, perhaps, but now I was seeing the latter and it was a terrible thing to behold.

Aspects were act, not simply a word, because they were an exercise of will. A piece of you made into a blade and turned against Creation. This, then, was intimate part of Masego. Of the man he was turning into, and there was cause for worry in it. To ruin something was no small thing: it was to destroy and devastate it irreparably. The Skein had spoken five letters and wiped away all we had wrought.

Masego replied with four and the world *shattered*.

The cavern came apart at the seams. Entire chunks of it split from the rest, drifting into black nothingness as unmoored ships, and like spider webs the destruction spread across all the Revenant's realm. Akua and I stood together as the bones beneath us began to spill into nothing, incomprehensibly coming back around to fall from the ceiling in another shard. My will extended into the ice I'd used to keep the gates open, and found they were still there. We were not ruined along the rest of this, then, not necessarily. The Skein moved, and in a myriad other shards did the same. Hierophant stood alone on his pile of bones, wreathed in ribbons of sorcery so thick it was visible to the eye, his smile almost innocently joyful. Wait had, the – my eyes flicked back and with muted horror I watched the platform on which the wheels stood slowly begin to topple into a streak of dark. I would not make it in time. It was not physically possible to... I inhaled and ice bloomed.

"Diabolist," I ordered.

The moment the glimmering silhouette finished taking shape, Akua was within it, having swum there through Winter. She reached down and snatched the edge of the highest wheel. The ice that made her up began to crack under the massive weight and from the corner of my eye I saw the Skein move towards her in a dozen different shards. He couldn't kill her through the shell, so it must be the artefact he was aiming for. I could not allow that, if any part of this was to be salvaged. Diabolist's will was ruling the ice construct, but what was that to me? I seized the reins and let Winter loose: it grew and swelled, a hunched apelike thing that tossed the wheels towards me like they were feather-light. A heartbeat later the Revenant tore through my creation, but I'd already ceased paying attention. A third of the way to me the artefact moved from a shard facing me to one in the far back and I leapt through the void. Flicker. Wrong shard. I was by Masego's side.

"Hierophant," I barked. "Contain the rat."

The dark-skinned man laughed almost drunkenly and brushed back his sleeves. Hands extended, he snapped his wrists together. Two shards collided in a spray of bones that obeyed no sense in where it went and fell, but two Revenant reflections went opposite ways and the undead screamed. It would do. Flicker. I crossed into another shard, almost tripping on a massive half-buried skull, and watched the wheels continue to arc down in the opposite direction. Which meant nothing, but – I made three shells of ice, eyeballing it, yet the artefact still collided entered a fourth. The Skein snatched them before they could bounce, and with a fanged grin leant over the edge of the shard to *throw* them down into the void. I learned from my mistake, this time. I formed the silhouette directly on the surface of the artefact and broadened it with rough strokes. Akua did not not need a reminder to seize it. Or instructions in how to operate the massive wings I had shaped.

That lasted until the Skein opened his maw and wisps of Winter were sucked out of the construct, leaving it no more than ice with a shade within. He could take it out as fast as I could pour it, I was pretty sure, so instead of wasting power I went for an alternative. I leapt into the void, gallantly suppressing the scream boiling out of my throat.

Fragments spread across places and times yet linked, always linked, for Winter was a single entity and the void's touch could be bridged. A thousands hands moved.

Akua had gone for numbers, I thought, and even as I fell into the dark I saw limbs, skeletons and even skulls move under Winter's writ, biting and grasping at the Skein. I found the wheels at last. Hurtling down into the nothing that would lead somewhere else. *My body is an illusion*, I told myself. I closed my eyes, let distractions fall away.

"My body is an illusion," I insisted.

Just glamour, and anything I had seen I could glamour. Wings or iridescent blue ripped out of my back, long and ephemeral. It was like moving a limb, if that limb had been wounded for months and I was only getting used to it

moving again. Angling my fall was easy enough. I collided with the wheels, setting my feet on the middle rung, and tried to convince myself that weight was an illusion as well.

"Sulia never cared about weight," I said. "*It does not apply to me*."

The wings didn't change. But instead of slowing, my descent stopped. And then slowly, painfully, we started rising.

"**Spool**," the Skein said.

I screamed in frustration and/

I was back on the shard where I'd begun, damn him.

"Did you think it would always work?" Hierophant laughed. "There is nothing I have seen you can take from me. **Witness**."

What was he/

I tightened my grip on the wheels, swinging them over the edge of the closest shard with a grunt. The Skein in most shards strangely looked like he'd taken to wearing armour, covered in a sea of remains that fruitlessly bit and clawed at his hide. Diabolist was trying to slow and blind him, with only mixed success. I glanced to the side, dragging the artefact further over the ledge, and froze when I saw myself standing near the gate, utterly furious. And again, in another shard, getting crushed by the Skein's clawed hands as he seized the wheels. Was I even the real one? No, the existential crisis could wait until later. I needed to get this to Masego so we could get out of here and find Malicia. I raised the wheels over my head and legged it. I couldn't even tell where this shard was related to the others, much less when: bones and void weren't exactly trail markers. I leapt across the nearest shard – flicker – and cursed as soon as I landed. The Skein was in this one, fighting... me. And our earlier work and been done anew, with the ratling bound by a string of my domain, forced into that painful stretched. The other Catherine glanced at me, then shrugged and began forming a massive spike of darkness above the Skein's head.

My own domain ebbed in answer.

Was she... *Eye on the prize, Catherine.* I made my way around the Revenant's desperate death throes and leapt. Flicker. This one was empty, save for aimlessly angry bones animated by Diabolist. My fists tightened around the artefact. I could keep this up for hours and still be lost.

"Hierophant," I called out. "Chart me a path."

A dot of blue light formed ahead of me then peeled off. Good enough. I followed as swiftly as I could, until it crossed into another shard. Flicker. Empty as well, except the Skein suddenly turned around in another shards and passed into this one. The Revenant loomed as tall as ever, though the smaller shard was forcing him to be careful where he stepped.

"I see you," the ratling hissed.

The dot of blue light wheeled to the left and crossed into another shard. Less than helpful, that, since unlike it I had to worry about the giant rat. See me, huh. Akua had seemed able to work through Winter in multiple shards, so theoretically... I sunk into my own mind, forcing myself to consider angles,

then bent Winter to my will. Across a dozen shards mirrors formed, reflecting the light from the pit into the Skein's eyes – which he was already covering, aware that with so many mirrors I'd covered near every angle he could look away to. Fucking oracles. It bought me a heartbeat where I ran for it, wheels over my head, but he swung blindly and with his size there was almost no need to aim. I managed a leap on a platform before I was swept away, but then the tail struck and even even tossing half a tower's worth of ice in the way only slowed it down. A repeat would be the end of this unfortunate magical adventure.

Following light like a current, through as many mirrors as there could be, and weaving power into the reflections. A dozen arrows loosed.

Akua used my work to craft her own, abandoning the undead to taint the light coming from the mirrors with concentrated cold. The Skein slowed, until he shook it off, but it was just long enough for me to manage the leap. The tail swung behind me, hitting only air. Flicker. Masego stood ahead of me, tracing runes that resonated like a gong and drove back the Skein when he attempted to cross behind me.

"Take it," I said, and tossed the wheels toward him.

It skidded across bones, and would have toppled him outright if he didn't hastily trace another rune to slow it down to a halt.

"Our entry gate," I said. "Make it lead to Malicia."

He wasted no time on backtalk, ripping away a string and tying it to the central axis as I cast a look around. The rat was trying to sneak through the back, but there would be none of that on my watch. I took the whole of my domain, ripping it away from three other Catherines trying to use it, and shaped it into a bolt that shot right at the Revenant as he leapt. It caught him in the chest, tearing through bone and flesh. Both it and the bolt fell into the void, and only then did I allow the others to play with my –our – domain again. A quick look told me Masego had tied the thread to a place on the lowest wheel, which was our signal to get the Hells out of here.

"Akua, back to me," I said, and yanked her.

I staggered at the impact, which was so much heavier than usual, but then she was at my shoulder again if looking none too pleased at the manhandling. She looked up, and her face fell.

"Catherine," she said, and her hand rose.

She shaped Winter, but it was too little and too late. The Skein fell down from above, shattering the wheels with a massive paw.

"You lose," the Revenant crowed.

The ground broke beneath our feet, and after that there was only the fall.

Chapter 44

Catherine's Plan

> "From the example of the claimant Desolate we can learn this: no scheme is so perfect that it is invulnerable to the utter idiocy of an opponent."
>
> Extract from an untitled historical commentary on the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One, by the Imperial Concubine Alaya of the Green Stretch

There was only the void to keep track of now, at least. Wings burst out of my back and with a swift beat had me spinning sideways: I caught Masego by the collar, though he kept wriggling uncomfortably. If this had been freefall back in Creation, the howl of the wind would have forced me to raise my voice. No such troubles plagued our descent into nothingness, a silver lining on a situation I knew to be bad but vaguely suspected was much, much worse.

"Can you get us out of here?" I asked, wings beating behind me to keep us aloft.

Diabolist was nothing more than a shade on my back, kept there by the fact I willed it so. Whatever weight she'd had earlier, it was gone now.

"There is no here," Hierophant replied. "We are in between places that exist, within the contained entity that was the central chamber."

"And can you get us out of *that*?" I hissed.

"It is an egg, Catherine," he said. "We are within. If you want to leave. . . "

Crack the shell, I thought. Easier said than done: if that'd been on the table since the beginning, there would have been much less planning needed. Could've burst straight into the Skein's lair, seized the wheels and assassinated Malicia. Of course, we *had* eventually burst into that lair. It hadn't gone what one might call 'well', or to be honest anywhere near that neighbourhood. After the elven Revenant I'd thought that Neshamah's guardians were dangerous yet not beyond our ability to handle. I'd just been roughly disabused of that notion. Even Masego picking up his second aspect had barely managed to get the situation under control long enough for the rat to screw us over again.

"Where do I hit?" I asked Hierophant.

The heart of our working relationship, laid bare.

"Anywhere," he laughed.

I blew out a cold breath and allowed Winter to slither through my veins. Our exertions fighting the Skein had not tired it. It felt, if anything, even more eager than before. I was beginning to grasp the secret at the heart of the fae, slowly but surely: their power delighted in use, rewarded it. I'd inherited that without the tight constraints of a role in the colourful but uncompromising tapestry that had once governed the entire realm of faerie. Before the King of Winter hoodwinked me into killing and freeing him with the same sentence, anyway. Who knew what the face of Arcadia was, now that its ever-feuding courts had become one? I felt Akua's not-eyed follow the shape of the power I was shaping, but she did not take part. She had not spoken a word since my last summons, I only now noticed.

"Diabolist?" I said.

"I am reaching the limit," the shade murmured through tight lips.

I glanced back, the light of my translucent wings casting her scarlet eyes almost purple to my sight.

"Of what?" I asked.

"How much principle alienation I can take for you," Diabolist said. "My thoughts already grow... stilted. Forced down unproductive paths."

I blinked in surprise. Shit. It was true I'd been tossing around Winter like rarely before and my mind remained mostly my own, but I'd not... There'd been a lot of sweet talk about apotheosis, of late. Foolishly enough, I'd assumed that I'd somehow outgrown my old troubles. Not so, evidently. How had Akua even – ah, the chain. Had to be. This entire time, she'd been taking the plunge so I would remain mostly clear-headed. I could only admire her capacity to master her own thoughts in the face of Winter influence, if her limit was only now reached. My tongue burned with a half a dozen questions but they would have to wait for later. There were no physical markers for me to hit around here, so I didn't bother with anything too precise. Ice and shadow, woven into a spike that spun and elongated into something closer to a massive javelin. I shaped it carefully, and only when I was satisfied with the flawlessness of the working did I let it loose. For a heartbeat, I hit nothing. The javelin kept moving through nothingness unimpeded, is momentum undaunted by the distance.

Then I hit a wall, or something close to it.

Like an arrow hitting stone my working did little more than leave a mark on the surface, but there was an unmistakable notch of damage on the surface of the nothingness in front of us. Winter's span was a difficult thing to measure, for my mantle obeyed no rules but its own and sometimes not even that, but I had put much of myself into the javelin. Enough that, with Akua no longer serving as my filter, I could feel the creep of influence at the edge of my mind. Still indistinct whispers, for now. They would grow louder, I knew, until there was no difference between them and my own thoughts. Hammering through wasn't going to work. I'd come out of here spouting monologues, if not worse,

and I wouldn't catch Malicia acting like the very same people she'd arranged the deaths of for decades over a nice cup of wine. I wasn't ready to call this a wash yet, and embracing the fullness of Winter was more or less that.

"Hierophant, I need you to pry that open," I said.

Masego frowned.

"Platform," he said.

Reluctantly, I snatched another wisp of Winter and crafted one beneath him before dropping his collar. He landed on his feet, if not particularly gracefully, but that wasn't what drew my attention. I could smell the sorcery on him. I always could, really, and given the amount of protective enchantments he layered on himself whenever we went into battle this should not be a surprise. But there was something different, this time. The magic was curving beneath his skin, deep into his body. My eyes narrowed and traced the shape of them with my mind, like a blind girl trying to see the face of another with my fingers. Some of that sorcery was going straight into his heart, keeping the blood pumping steadily. More was stiffening muscles, like those of his lower back. Keeping him standing up straight. And there were two little pinpricks, going into smaller glands above his kidneys. Forcing them to keep functioning, for whatever eldritch purpose. My studies of anatomy had largely been aimed towards killing or more recreational affairs, but I could recognize the sight of a man tinkering with his own body to keep it going when it was falling apart. He'd used powerful sorceries, today. Birthed an aspect, and used another. Back when I'd been the Squire and just that, even calling on a single such power would have wiped me out. A long overdue reminder that Masego, like the rest of the Woe, was still very much human. With all the messy, unpleasant parts that involved.

I kept my mouth shut anyway as he began to trace runes.

If I'd been a better friend, a better person, I might have taken the burden off his shoulders. Valiantly declared that we would find another way, that I'd take care of it somehow. But I was just me, and it was too late for last-hour gambits. I needed Malicia dead, and I needed it done *soon*. I'd have to trust that Masego would not irreparably hurt himself, and let him bleed for my objectives. *Isn't it funny?* I thought. *How the higher you rise, the more power comes into the shape of others suffering for you.* I was not smiling. But what was the worth of that, if I still kept silent?

"I can turn a scuffmark into a hole," Hierophant finally said. "That is, I'm afraid, the limit of what I can do. You will have to address the rest of the matter."

I nodded.

"Do it," I ordered.

He attacked the mark I'd left with what looked like twin thin needles of light, but to my senses felt more like a chisel and a hammer. One was heavier than the other, using the weaker one to pry open the wall. Masego's breath quickened, and I felt some of the spells on his body weaken. Like Diabolist,

he was nearing his limit. The Woe were powerful, for our age. More than we had any right to. But if we could not hurt our enemy badly in the initial stretch of the fight, as a group we had a tendency to begin slowly losing. Too many shortcuts. Too many advances with weak foundations. We had rushed to power, and it'd made us fragile. I dismissed the thought, and sharpened my will like a blade as Hierophant finished making that final breach. A small one, less than an inch wide. But I could feel Creation behind it, and an opening was all I'd needed. I called on my domain, the night-realm within, and before it could fall over us like a curtain I wove the smallest sliver through the breach. Gave us a path into Creation.

Night followed.

My wings died behind me as I tread soft snow, the starless sky above spreading out forever. Masego stumbled and shivered as he joined me, but I guided away the worst of the cold with a thought and offered him an arm to lean on. I'd already asked too much of him today. Akua did not appear: she'd always been there. I simply had not acknowledged her presence, or so it felt like. And it was not her fae guise she wore, either. In here, I looked upon the same Diabolist I had fought in Liesse. Tall and splendid, all aristocratic arrogance and careless disdain. In here, all we had done to hide her true face fell away. Unlike Hierophant, she was not burdened by the touch of my kingdom of moonless night. She looked up at the pitch-black firmament and smiled, as if I'd taken her to a tea shop with a charming decor instead of the last remaining hold of the Winter Court. She hummed quietly, lips quirking. I knew that song.

Parts of it, anyway.

"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."

Her voice was soft, and the pitch of the tune perfect.

"Diabolist," I sharply said.

She turned to me, still smiling.

"Come, dearest heart," Akua said, eyes alight with savage glee. "Let us speak to the Empress of *succession*."

My fingers clenched. I still remembered the conversation she'd had with Thief, not so long ago. She'd thrown the argument, as Vivienne had suspected, but the girl who'd once been Heiress never spoke with a single purpose to her words. Had she known I was a wake and listening, even then? Maybe. Or perhaps she was addressing that inscrutable audience that always listened, the unseen hand of fate that always sought to curb us to its purpose. She wanted me to be Empress. She wanted, perhaps, to be my Chancellor. And she thought Malicia's death would be the birth of that story. Damnably, she might be right. I hoped, against my better judgement, that is was the flesh simulacrum of the Empress that awaited us. I was already in too many knife-fights with fate to pick yet another.

"Follow," I said, and tugged Masego along.

I left no trace on the snow, and neither did Akua. She had become a creature of this place, by hook and crook. It was Hierophant, sagging and increasingly drenched in cold sweat, that needed the help. I propped him up until the itch in the back of my head had grown too much to ignore. I could feel it, the... depression in this place. As if the supports beneath my domain were uneven and it had sagged. I closed my eyes and withdrew it all. A sea unleashed, slowly siphoned back into my too-small frame, until the touch of the sun was on my face and my eyes fluttered open. We were back in the Threefold Reflection, at last. Green light fell down over us like a shower from a sun pit towering high above, kept functional through all hours of the day by a cunning set of mirrors. This was a salon, by the looks of it, with long resting couches and low tables filling most the place. There were half a dozen doors out of the room, likely meant for servants more than the guests.

"The palace still seems... whole," I said.

"I would assume the three layers to be completely separate now," Akua replied. "This felt like Creation to you, yes? Likely this the the original Threefold Reflection that was built before the dimensional overlay was set."

"So no more shunting," I said. "Good news. Much as I hate to ask, what plan are we on now?"

Diabolist laughed.

"I'm afraid there is none left," she said. "None that I can remember, at least. This particular sequence of events was entirely unforeseen."

Shoddy planning, that. Given how frequently we fucked it all up, not counting that as an option was just bad form on our part.

"You two are done fighting for the day," I finally said.

"I am still conscious," Masego muttered.

"Takes a little more than that to be qualified for a throw down with the Empress' finest," I replied

Assuming we even found them.

"Diabolist, I'm going to find us a way out," I said. "Try to find the others and prepare for the worst."

"I would be of use to you, when facing Malicia," the shade replied.

"You should be more careful about what songs you sing," I replied flatly.

Masego's glass eyes moved from one of us to the other, his face bemused.

"What songs?" he asked.

I met Akua's now-scarlet eyes and found a thread of amusement in there. That song... The Girl Who Climbed The Tower, Black had called it. There were still many things about it I didn't understand. I'd first heard Robber humming it, but when I'd eventually asked him about it years later he'd admitted he recalled singing an entirely different song. It was not for everyone's ears, it seemed.

"Don't worry about it," I told him, then glanced up.

I could roll the dice with trying to find a way out of the pyramid on foot, but that carried risks. There might still be traps, even without the wheels being a factor. This would do. Window was probably warded, but then I still had the traditional Foundling skeleton key of punching things really hard. Wisps of Winter coalesced behind me, translucent wings coming into being, and I shot up quick as an arrow. My fist smashed into the green glass with my full weight behind it, but I let out a yelp when it bounced off harmlessly and I hit the damned thing like a bird hitting a window. Godsdamnit. Down below, I heard Masego cough out a pained laugh. The glass was set in that pale stone I recognized from outside, with discreet carved runes connecting them. Fine, I could work with that. Wings batting behind me unconsciously, I formed my fingers into a wedge and struck at the stone. I'd aimed well beneath the runes, so I ripped my way through without too much trouble. After that it was just a matter of digging around the boundaries, until I tossed down a stone-encircled glass pane and flew up through the opening. I landed under the noon sun of Keter, while in the distance the plume of smoke from the fires we'd set began to disperse. They'd put out the fires, then.

Look down into the pit, I saw the other two awaiting me. Akua could make her own way up, but Masego would need a little help. Another sliver of Winter had a thick rope of shadow slithering down the pit. Hierophant eyed it sceptically, until an exertion of my will had it tying around his waist. I dragged him up, hoist by hoist, careful not to go too quickly and smash him into the walls. My fingers closed around the back of his neck, and with all the gentleness I could manage I took him out and put him down. Gods, it was like trying not to hurt a baby bird. People were so fragile. The three of us stood under true Creation sunlight for the first time in too long, Akua and I pristine but Masego the picture of exhaustion. He'd lost weight, but there was quite a bit of difference between shedding the pounds – unhealthy as his manner of doing it had been – and being in good shape. We were maybe halfway up the southern slope of the pyramid, facing the Garden of Crowns and the edge of the Silent Palace. The gardens and colonnades below showed no sign of Malicia, but then I'd not expected that to be so easy.

"We have an escape route in case this all blows up in our face," I half-stated, half-asked.

My eyes were on Akua, making it clear who was meant to answer.

"That is correct," she replied. "Though it was expected that true disaster would force is to flee through Arcadia."

"Then fall back there," I said. "The others will know the way?"

"By now, all their memory blocks should have ended," she replied.

Good enough, given that I couldn't afford going around fetching everyone. Adjutant I might be able to find, but who the Hells knew where Archer was? Thief was the last out in the wilds, and to be honest there was no chance of me finding her in the city if she didn't want to be found.

"Be safe, you two," I said, and grimaced immediately.

I was painfully aware that the words being spoken in *Keter* made them even more a platitude than usual. There was no safety here, only the Dead King's whimsical sufferance.

"That seems unlikely," Masego noted. "But I shall attempt it nonetheless."

I squeezed his shoulder before sending him off. It would be slow work for him to descend the pyramid's slope, but hardly impossible. Diabolist could handle herself, and the steady look I gave her before she left made it clear she was supposed to ease his exhaustion as much as possible. All that was left now was to somehow find Malicia, crush her defences and taker her life. All without breaching the unspoken rules the Dead King had set about what would constitute breaking his hospitality. I doubted Neshamah would truly mind a spot of murder even in his personal backyard, but that wasn't how this worked: I had to maintain a certain level of deniability. Which wasn't looking great, considering the closest thing I had to a plan at the moment was 'murder in broad daylight'. The Skein and the Spellblade should no longer be a part of this, at least. The Revenants would remain stuck in their little kingdoms. That left the Empress' own personal guard.

The Sentinels hardly scared me, at the end of the day. Well-trained or not, they were only soldiers. But there was a more than decent chance she'd have Wasteland mages with her, and that was a different story entirely. I'd killed more than a few of those, over the last few years, but that'd been before I'd become... this. Wards mattered to me a lot more than they used to, and I wasn't meeting a cluster of casters in the middle of a chaotic battlefield: these sorcerers would likely have been told everything the Empress knew about what I could and couldn't do, including vulnerabilities. Black had made a career out of killing enemies much stronger than him with careful planning and preparation. I did not intend to end up on the wrong side of his teachings. Power clapped in the distance, a quick spike followed by smaller workings. I cocked my head. Northern slope of the pyramid, maybe a little further. A trap? Maybe. Or a distraction. But I couldn't afford not to look, could I?

With gritted teeth, I set out for my little talk with the Dread Empress of Praes.

Chapter 45

Ambush

> "As the Bellerophans had not redrawn their war maps in over a century, their expedition against Penthes instead began with the sack of three outlying Delosi towns, one of which was walled and whose watchmen rebuffed the assault of the army. The Republic ultimately withdrew a month later after capturing a Stygian trade caravan carrying a handful Penthesian goods, announcing the unequivocal success of its punitive expedition to the great confusion of the Exarch of Penthes, who was still mustering her army over three hundred miles to the north."
>
> Extract from 'A Pack of Squabbles, or, A History of Internal League Warfare' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

If it was a distraction, then it was a good one – not that I'd expected any less from Malicia. Boots scraping against the faded stone, I crouched at the edge of the pyramid's slope and studied the silhouettes below. Twenty-one, all in all. Ten faceless and genderless soldiers in steel with masks of black wrought iron, the Tower's own personal guard. The Sentinels, I'd been taught was their name. I was unsure of how hard a fight they'd be able to give me, but they were not a young Praesi institution. If even half the the hundred Tyrants who'd once commanded them had bothered to teach them a nasty trick or two, they would not be easy meat. The silent guard formed a ring of steel, broad tower shields up as they protected the remaining delegates. Those, I thought, would be the source of the real trouble if there was trouble to be had. Of the eleven remaining strangers only two wore armour and it was clearly ceremonial. Not unlike the colourful scales I'd known Diabolist to wear before she claimed that very Name. Those two were Soninke, men and too flawless to look upon to be anything but Wasteland highborn.

I dismissed them anyway. The warlocks would be the real threat here, not swordsmen no matter their skill. And there *were* mages among the delegates, I could tell as much at a glance. None of the other Praesi wore a weapon heavier than a long dagger, and though their robes were an ornate riot of vivid silks

the colours were not enough to hide the discreet shimmer of runes woven into the fabric. Defensive enchantments, though without Masego around I had no real way to know of their purpose. What I *did* know was that while silk was one of the fabrics most apt to imbibe magic without spoiling, there was only so much sorcery any fabric could take. Against another sorcerer, defensive enchantments were a significant advantage. Against me, it'd be trying to hold back the sea with a wooden bucket. *I'll still have to hit them hard*, I thought. *Smaller wisps of Winter will just be ignored, if I'm to strike at them it'll have to be by surprise and with overwhelming force.* Admittedly my favourite kind of fights, on the rare occasions I managed to have them.

One person stood out from the rest, and the sight of her had me tightening my grip on the pommel of my sword. The woman was Soninke and young. No more than twenty, by the looks of her, and though she was of plain appearance every other delegate around her behaved like sunflowers turning towards the sun. Her dress was tastefully understated, as was the silver jewellery adorning her neck and wrists, but there was no mistaking who that was. I wasn't Malicia in the flesh, or more accurately it was but not *her* flesh. A simulacrum, then. I felt a sharp edge of relief at the confirmation of what I'd always believed to be the most likely reality. And yet part of me was disappointed as well. There would have been chaos, in slaying the true Malicia, but opportunity as well. If I'd been able to force a war of succession on the Empire without getting embroiled myself... No point in whining about it. It was what it was, and in this case the presence of a mere flesh puppet might be a blessing. Said puppet was awake and alert, I saw, and with good reason.

It had just almost died.

I'd arrived too late to see it happen, but just from the lay of the Praesi I could get an idea of what had taken place. Just as they'd left the Threefold Reflection through the nearest gate and taken the avenue into the tall colonnade they now occupied, someone had taken a shot at the Empress. The shimmering panes of light around the flesh puppet told me exactly why it'd failed, and pointed at the most likely suspect for the attempt: Thief. It couldn't be Archer. She had arrows that'd go right through most sorceries, and even if she'd failed to make a kill at a distance she would have closed in and carved away at the Sentinels. Adjutant had not aspect that would work for a quiet ambush, and I'd just left behind the remaining two. No, it had to be Thief. The Skein had hinted, back in his lair, that she might try to kill Malicia with the same blade of moonlight she'd stolen from the Spellblade. That was my guess: she'd approached under cover of her aspect, placed her shot and immediately retreated when it failed to breach the Empress' protections. I couldn't be sure whether that failure was because the Praesi wards were particularly strong or because the tool employed had not been a good fit, and that was worrying.

They hadn't seen me, at least for now. I'd not woven glamour over myself yet, afraid some of the mages would be sensitive enough to such powers it would effectively announced my presence even if they couldn't see through

it. The moment the delegation caught scent of me, my bet was that they'd turtle up behind heavy wards and make enough of a racket that the Dead King's people would have to come and take a look. If that was allowed to happen, the game was done. Pushing any further would break the unspoken boundaries Neshamah had placed on this little lark of ours. Was Thief still around? My guts said yes, but I couldn't count on it. She might still be acting according to a plan I didn't know. Which was the point of all this, I supposed. We'd filled the Skein's sight with so many of those there'd been no telling where the rest of the Woe were or what they were up to. At the unfortunate cost of my being kept in the dark concerning those matters as well. I set aside the thoughts for now, eyes one the Praesi delegates. They were on the defensive for now, the Sentinels using the cover of the colonnade to form a decent holding position while the mages layered enchantments, but they'd get moving soon.

If I were in Malicia's shoes, right now, I'd be worrying more about Archer than Thief. The longer she remained in the open, the higher the risks she got an unexpected arrow through the throat. If I wanted to have a decent swing at the Empress, I needed to be close by the time they set out. Which left me with the task of moving unseen next to a cluster of highly-trained, professionally paranoid and recently ambushed Wastelanders. While wearing armour. In broad daylight. With no real cover to speak of the moment I left the upper reaches of the pyramid. This was not a recipe for success no matter how you looked at it, but at least I was wearing mail instead of plate. Pretty weak, as far as silver linings went, but I'd take what I could get.

Pulling the Mantle of Woe tight around me, since it was colourful but at least not actively shining under the sun, I began to make my way down. Obliquely, or as close to that as was possible. There were open grounds between the colonnade and the end of the Threefold Reflection proper, and crossing those unseen was a fool's errand. No, the longer I thought about it the more obvious it got I'd have to roll the dice on my ability to predict where the Praesi would be headed and lay my ambush there.

There were only so many places they could go, I mused as I moved from stone to stone. There was another palace up ahead, but I wouldn't put my money on them going for it. There'd be another Revenant inside, certainly, but it didn't look like the most... hospitable of places. The fluid obsidian structures were unpleasant to look at in some primal way, though it was the outlying decorations that would give the Praesi pause. Small channels had been dug into the stone in arcane symbols, lit up by what appeared to be liquid flame. The palace flicked with shifting shadows even under sunlight. If they went through there, I'd kill them all. They'd be forced to take narrow fire-walled paths with plenty of cover for me to ambush from. Unless the Revenant was already in place and ready to intervene, the outlying parts of that palace would be a perfect killing floor for me. Malicia herself wasn't a military tactician of any renown, but she was hardly a fool. It'd be one of the other two paths she took.

The first would be a gambit on her part. The colonnade and almost temple-like promenade surrounding the pyramid did have a path going around towards the open plaza where the Hall of the Dead and a horde of minions would be awaiting. If the Empress made it there safely, she was out of the woods. I couldn't snatch her out of the Dead King's grasp without screwing all of this up. On the other hand, I was rather hoping that was the option she'd take. I was already near to the last third of the pyramid, and all it'd take was dipping out of the sight around the corner for me to slip ahead of her party in the colonnade. I'd already begun angling my descent to be a step ahead if that was the choice she made. Malicia had to know, however, that it was a mostly open space and most the Woe were still on the prowl. Forget Thief, but if Archer came across her there'd be blood on the floor. Quickest path to safety, but arguably the most dangerous.

The second path was a retreat. Not back into the Threefold Reflection – though that was possible, if exceedingly foolish – but towards the lower rungs of Keter. We were all in the highest ring at the moment, surrounded by the same rampart Athal had taken me to earlier through the secret passage. The Empress could head for those walls, and from there either count on the Dead King's soldiers being there and providing protection or journey further down and away from the area she knew the Woe was roaming. I'd had the advantage of height over her earlier, so I already knew there were no undead on the ramparts at the moment. Indeed, their absence was quite glaring. Neshamah was quite pointedly looking away, in a manner of speaking. Malicia wouldn't necessarily know that, though. The Crown of the Dead screwed badly with scrying rituals, so it wasn't like she could have a look through a bowl. If she went with that choice, she was keeping the game afoot. As long as she wasn't surrounded by undead soldiers, she remained a target no matter how far down she fled. I wasn't all that familiar with the rest of the city, though, so we'd both be going into that blind.

I'd reached one of the pyramid's four spines when the Praesi moved out. Peeking around the corner, I grinned nastily as I watched the delegation head towards the central plaza at a brisk pace. She'd bet it all on a quick resolution, then. I could work with that. I picked up the pace as well, dropping down on the ground long before they were in sight of the turn. Fingers drumming against my sheath, I eyed the spot where the ambush would have to take place: right after the turn, with a clear line of sight to the path leading to the plaza. The columns were but a few feet apart and joined by a low wall on the outer half of the colonnade, though the half facing the pyramid was without. The turn was angled too circular for me to be able to hide in the bend, sadly, but there was another detail to this construction: a ceiling. Barded with criss-crossing beams of copper, the angular stone roof was held up by the columns. The ceiling itself was filled, but there was room between the long stretch of stone supported by those same columns and the roof itself. Not much, but then for once my size might come in as actually useful. A few years ago, the notion of hanging from a

ceiling like a fucking bat to swoop down on my enemies would have struck me as absurd, especially if I was wearing armour. Now, though? It wasn't like my arms could get tired anymore.

It'd have to be around the turn, otherwise the moment the enemy approached they'd just see me hanging there. That'd turn awkward real quick, leading to questions like 'why did you think that would work?' or even worse, small talk. I wasn't emotionally prepared to make polite conversation with the Empress while murder-hanging from a ceiling. I hoisted myself up the low wall and frowned up at the column. There was distinct lack of good handholds, but using Winter would be tipping my hand and I needed to hurry before the enemy arrived. With all the grace of a one-legged squirrel, I hugged the column and shimmied my way up. It was easier up there: I caught one of the copper beams and left the column, effortlessly dragging my hole body up and spreading my legs to gain more traction from other beams. My free hand went into collection my cloak, which was now hanging like a shitty tapestry, and just kind of bunching it up over my stomach before I pulled myself close to the ceiling. There, that should do. I was kind of hoping Thief wasn't around, because if she saw me I'd never live this down. I heard the footsteps, then their words.

"The Dead King's enchantments make it impossible to use proper sensory spells," a woman's voice sighed in Mtethwa. "My apologies, Your Dread Majesty. My abilities are lacking."

"I hardly expected you to be the Hidden Horror's superior in matters of spellcraft, Lady Olinga," the flesh puppet replied. "Already your wards proved your worth by sparing me the Thief's ambush."

"She may well still be lurking about," a man warned. "And the Adjutant will have found a way out of the illusions by now. We must hurry."

"Any faster will disrupt the wards," Lady Olinga peevishly replied. "It already took me decades to train them to be able to maintain it while moving."

"The Warlock can-"

"I am not the Warlock," the Soninke cut through. "Nor even the Hierophant. Do ask miracles of me, Galadan, when you can barely use High Arcana yourself."

"We will proceed at the current pace," Not-Malicia said, and I could almost hear the soothing smile. "Peace, my friends. This interlude soon comes at an end."

Well, she wasn't wrong about that. More worryingly, I was hearing the Empress and the highborn moving but not a single Sentinel footstep. Spelled gear, had to be. And there was no telling what calibre either. Enchanted artefacts weren't as rare in Praes as they were in Callow, but even in the Wasteland it was the petty stuff that wasn't kept within powerful families. Magic made into enchantment waned over time, so for anything to last for more than a few years it had to be an extremely powerful mage – or ritual – that had first made the artefact. The lesser stuff had to be empowered anew pretty regularly, and most mages saw that kind of repeat labour as beneath them. Which meant finding

another practitioner to take care of it, certainly easier in Praes than my homeland, but artefacts only worked perfectly for the mages who'd first made them. After that, every set of hands they passed through made them a little shoddier until they broke down. Of course, then you got the stuff out of myth. Which tended to be either like the Lone Swordsman's, a feather from an angel that'd made intense eye contact with Creational laws until they backed away uncomfortably, or your average legendary stuff. Which had both been crafted by the kind of sorcerer or Named that came around once a century and been made out of materials with inherent magical properties that kept the enchantments going indefinitely. All stuff that was rare, difficult to obtain and horribly, horribly expensive. Archer's longbow was probably worth a pair of large palaces in Procer, if she ever tried to pawn it in Mercantis, and it wasn't even quite up to snuff compared to some of the stuff out there.

Now, if they were from anywhere else, I'd dismiss the thought of the Sentinels having even one piece of such gear out of hand. Personal guards or not, they wouldn't rank that kind of ridiculous expense. They were, unfortunately, from the Dread Empire of Praes. When a nation got a line of three emperors that picked *Profligate* as a reigning name, terrible monetary decisions were only to be expected. And that was without thinking of the gaggle of practitioner Tyrants that'd held the Tower with just as many Warlocks serving beneath them, few of which had ever held qualms about a little mass murder and assorted bankruptcy if it got in the way of their latest idea. Even then, there couldn't be too many of it. Enough to equip ten guards, though. Would Malicia risk that kind of precious equipment by bringing it to Keter? My guts said yes. She wasn't a mage herself, and like the Calamities she'd never shown a great deal of respect for artefacts that were relevant only on the tactical level. I could easily see her kitting out her handpicked Sentinels in the good stuff both as a show of force for the Dead King and for that little additional sliver of safety abroad.

Which meant I couldn't just ignore the soldiers, as I'd intended to previously. They might have stuff that could hurt fae – no, knowing Malicia they *definitely* had stuff that hurt fae. Still, the sorcerers remained the greater threat. Fighters, even dangerous ones, I could kill my way through. If I got stuck behind a ward, there was no getting out. I held my breath, lips thinning when I realized my lungs never began to burn. Yet another comforting illusion that would not withstand scrutiny. Eyes wide open I waited for the Praesi to approach. Artefact-bearers or not, the Sentinels still wore those fucking stupid masks. They couldn't easily look up, and their peripheral vision was shit. I'd let them pass me before dropping down and take out as many mages as I could in the first strike. Without a sound a pair of steel-clad soldiers passed under me, and then – *shit*.

I dropped down before the streak of lightning could tear through my belly. Had that come out of an opal? Did I have to start worrying about the jewellery on people's clothes now? The Sentinels were on me before the others could so

much as exclaim in surprise, swords swinging. Sorcery flared behind them, the mages taking action, and I knew without a doubt that if I got stuck in a brawl with the soldiers this was headed downhill. *Never give mages time to cast*. I breathed out, and ripped away another illusion. I stepped through the sword blows, the mist that was now my torso billowing as their blades went through. One step, two, three and then I was among the mages. Solid, I ordered my body. My blade ripped through a Taghreb's throat and the panes of light around Malicia dimmed, her eyes widening in fear and surprise. I tugged out a string of my domain, shaped it and let it loose with a flick of the wrist. The javelin of night-stuff flew perfectly, puncturing the sorcerous protection and...

Breaking an illusion.

Fuck. A ward closed around me a heartbeat later and I found myself surrounded by very displeased Praesi. With a sigh I rose from my half-crouch, adjusted my cloak and offered the delegation a winning smile. I did not get a single one in response, which might have something to do with the man bleeding out on the ground a mere foot behind me.

"Well," I muttered. "This is a little awkward."

I reached for Winter but found my will couldn't quite make it. That, I mused, was not a promising start to these negotiations.

Chapter 46

Possibly A Plan

> "To declare an assertion of the People untrue is unlawful, even if it was retroactively asserted by vote to be untrue, at which point referring to it as either true or untrue is equally unlawful."
>
> Bellerophan formal codex of laws, circa 1321 A.D.

The transparent bubble around me was solid, as I found out with a swift strike of what must have been at least my fifteenth sword of the day. I was pretty sure the one made out of goblin steel was still with the Spellblade, since I'd never actually picked it up. Over the span of a single heartbeat the Praesi delegation's entire body language had shifted. Where before the illusion had been the centre of their attention, they now all faced the taller of the two men wearing ceremonial armour. I'd expected another illusion to break and Malicia's flesh puppet to be revealed but then the stranger smiled and I realized I was already looking at it. Shit, she'd never said she was limited to using women as puppets had she?

"Catherine," the Empress greeted me in a pleasant baritone. "You've made quite the entrance."

I coughed.

"Would you believe I was just cleaning my sword and my hand slipped?" I tried.

Not so much as a twitch from anyone. Tough crowd.

"Worth a shot," I shrugged.

"So much for the cunning Black Queen," a robe-clad man sneered.

From the voice, it was the one called Galadan. His interlocutor had pointedly not used a noble titled when bickering with him, so odds were he was just a talented practitioner snatched young and groomed by one of the powerful houses.

"Galadan, was it?" I said slowly, lips quirking as the name echoed with the taste of Winter. "I'll remember that."

There were days where my reputation was like a stone around my neck, making what should have been the simplest matters a brutal grind where my best intentions were turned to dross no matter what I tried. But there were days, as well, where the balance swung the other way. I was standing alone and surrounded, bound by a ward I'd wager had been crafted specifically to deal with me, and I had nothing left to bare at the man but teeth. Galadan still *flinched*. Malicia chuckled lightly at the sight.

"One does not lightly taunt a tiger, even caged," she chided her subordinate. "There is no need for uncouthness, Queen in Callow. Threats this early in the conversation strike me as in poor taste."

I should go alone with the beat, of course, dance that highborn dance of manners and double-speak and bladed implications. But we'd done that for a year now, the both of us, and the more I learned about what she'd been up all the whole to the more I realized how deeply I'd been played. She'd let me bleed my kingdom, my armies, my *people* against her enemies while she plotted to unleash the Dead King. I would not condemn her for desperation, not when it had driven me to the same madness, but there had been calculation behind her despair. She would let the demon out of the box only when Callow had seen the wilfulness beaten out of it by the Tenth Crusade, and not a moment before. It'd make me a hypocrite to talk about the wickedness of making pact with the Hidden Horror, but I was not unreasonable in the fury I felt at the knowledge that she'd intended to bleed me out for her advantage.

I spat to the side.

"You know me," I grinned toothily. "Proper savage, I am. That's how they raise us in the provinces."

Malicia sighed.

"There is no need for such antagonism," she said. "You have attempted to murder me, certainly, but that is a small thing. Expected, in many ways. We had a confluence of interests at the last hour of Liesse, and may have one currently as well. It is neither of us that most benefits from this squabble."

"You funded Liesse," I replied calmly. "Enabled it. You were, to use that most damning word, *complicit*."

"And yet," the Dread Empress of Praes said, "when presented with the finished weapon you agreed with me on the necessity of its existence. Our present situation is not so different."

I had come to regret it, over the months that followed that nightmare, that I had even for a moment agreed with Malicia. That I'd been able to set aside the pile of bodies the doomsday fortress had been raised from for the golden lie of the peace it might be able to force. I'd often thought of pragmatism as the highest of all virtues, since I'd become the Squire. So many time I'd crossed blades with heroes and villains who were so wrapped up in what they might be able to make of the world that they were unwilling to face the reality of what it was. But I'd learned. It was a virtue, when properly used, but to embrace it at the exclusion of all else was to become Black. Cunning, victorious and brutally

efficient. Dead inside too, though, more means than man. The kind of person that brought only ruin wherever they went.

"And so the devil complains the other devil is tricking us both," I laughed. "Quite the assertion, when you've already escalated the offer beyond what either of us can afford."

"The Principate is an existential threat to us both," the Empress said. "That is fact, not speculation. So long as Procer is not dismantled, even victory tomorrow would only result in the same war erupting anew in twenty years. You are quite aware of this, or you would not have requested signatory status with the Grand Alliance."

"Hasenbach isn't the one whose ships are burning your coasts," I pointed out. "And Levant's on the march. Bit more to this than the First Prince having a go at the East."

"Ashur will seek separate peace the moment the Grand Alliance collapses," Malicia patiently said. "It will be costly to settle, but the Empire is the wealthiest it has been in several generations. The Dominion is willing to fight under the cross, but to defend Procer? Even if they are cajoled into it and somehow manage victory, they will have no stomach for pressing with another war after turning back the Dead King."

"It's an interesting sell that you're making between the lines," I noted. "Instead of your shield protecting the western flank with the Principate, you're trying to talk me into being the same for your western flank with the *Dead King*. What a favour you're granting me. I have to praise the audacity, if nothing else."

"Let us not quibble over details," Malicia flatly said. "You meant to release him yourself. If betrayal in the terms is your worry, I am willing to grant you the right to read the final treaties and sit at the signing."

"I meant to loose him only on the northernmost edges of Procer," I sharply replied. "Where the damage inflicted could be kept to a strict minimum and he'd have to defend narrow beachheads against the entire Tenth Crusade. You, on the other hand, are handing him almost a third of the continent's most densely populated farmland on a silver platter. I don't care how good your binding oaths are, if he manages to swallow that big a prize the rest of Calernia is fucked. Including me, including *you*. You can't possibly be so desperate you can't see that."

"There is quite the difference between recognizing someone's rights to territory and the other party being able to seize it," the Empress said. "Some principalities will fall, I expect. Not enough. And what remains of Procer will be embroiled in permanent bloody warfare to the north, a grind on the resources of both participants."

"See, I would have bought that before I saw Keter with my own eyes," I told her. "Saw the kind of tools the Dead King has at his disposal. I'm telling you, and Gods I would love it if you actually took me to my word for once, he has a fucking *legion* of monsters to unleash. He's been sitting pretty on this for

millennia, Malicia, picking up every strong Named he came across and adding them to his arsenal. Procer can barely handle me, and that's with the hand of the Heavens so far up their asses you can see the fingers wiggling between the teeth. They are not capable of handling what he'll send marching."

"Evil," the Empress replied serenely, "does not win wars. That is a law of nature, true as sunrise or the moving of the tides. You have inherited Amadeus' most dangerous delusion in believing otherwise. He could empty all the Howling Hells and it would not matter one bit. The only way to eke out a victory, Catherine, is *not to fight*."

"And how's that been working out for you?" I harshly asked.

"My armies are intact," Malicia smiled. "I have avoided loss of any significant industry or resources and maintained my hold on all my core territories. Your need to war with every foe in sight, on the other hand, has broken your only host, brought several outlying regions of Callow to the brink of rebellion and left you exceedingly vulnerable to attack from every single other state on the continent."

"You know," I mused, "we usually get that speech from the west instead of the east. Oh, Callow's on fire but *my* lands are fine. You must be a bunch of blunderers. Forgetting, of course, that the only reason the princes of Procer aren't bickering over who gets the nicer parts of your fucking capital is that my people bled at the borders to drive them back."

"You expect my sympathy for the costs of defending your own lands?" the Empress said, tone mildly sardonic.

"You know," I said, "that's fair. It really is. It's not like my armies gives a damn about the Wasteland. But then you don't get to parade the success of your masterful 'strategy' either, Malicia, when the only thing that makes it work is that my kingdom's in the way of an invasion. You haven't played everyone like a fiddle. You didn't raise a godsdamned hand even when the Ashurans started sacking your cities. All you did was read a fucking map and take a bet on human nature."

She laughed in my face, an older man's rich and riotous laughter.

"Indeed, I truly am a fool for having achieved all my desired outcomes without any true cost to myself," she said. "However will I live this down?"

"No cost?" I said. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. Your little episode in Liesse cost you quite a bit, didn't it? More than half the Legions. Your finest generals, and probably the person dearest to you in the world. All of Callow, too. How's it feel, Alaya, to join the roster of empresses who pissed away a kingdom out of pride?"

The flesh puppet turned dark eyes on me.

"One of your better attempts," she noted. "Given two or three decades, you might survive a month at court without someone cleaning up behind you. Evidently, you are disinclined to cooperate even when it is to our common advantage. Let us part ways, then."

I went for Winter again. Still just out of the reach of my fingertips. The harder I set my will to it, though, the more I felt like there might be some give. Was the ward pitting willpower against willpower? There were four warlocks keeping this going that I could see, and Wasteland mages were taught from the cradle that Creation was theirs to master. That didn't breed weak wills, though sometimes brittle ones. I might be able to pull that off, given long enough, but it wasn't a certainty. And I'd be up to my neck in Sentinels before then. I shifted my stance, wrist slowly rotating as I flicked the last of the blood off my sword.

"This the part where you have your little toy soldiers try me?" I casually said. "Should be interesting to see if they can kill me."

"You are a skilled swordswoman," a Taghreb mage snorted. "Yet not so skilled as that."

"You mistake me," I smiled. "Even if your pack of silent hounds hacks me to pieces, will I actually *die*?"

That gave them pause.

"Lost half my face and torso, not even an hour ago," I said. "A Named elf did that with one of the dangerous aspects I've ever seen. You think you can swing harder than that? I'm genuinely curious, what do you have to throw at me that'll keep me down for the count?"

"Cold iron," Galadan hissed.

I snorted.

"That's cute," I said. "My own crown is made of that, you mouthy second-rater. But, Hells, give it a shot. It's not like my way to the throne hasn't been paved by the bodies of Wastelanders who just *knew* they had my number."

I straightened, gaze sweeping across the Praesi delegation.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," I said with a savage grin, "which brave soul wants to be the first example I make today?"

Silence was my answer, and when I inhaled the fear that had swelled up under their calm faces I could not be sure whether it was me or Winter that delighted in it. The spell was broken by a slow clap. Malicia's simulacrum was smiling.

"You truly do have a talent for this," she said. "Beyond even what you were taught. Still, you have ever been slow to learn. Did I not tell you, Catherine? To win, it is best not to fight at all."

The puppet glanced at her subordinates.

"The ward anchors will remain here," she said. "The rest of us will proceed to the Hall of the Dead and resume negotiation."

The man's face turned to me, and inclined Malicia inclined his head by a fraction.

"A good day to you, Black Queen," she said. "May you survive the consequences of what you have wrought."

The smiled turned mirthless.

"After all," she finished, "I still have a use for you."

Oooh, that'd been *cold*. Had to grant her the due for that, and I knew cold better than most. I gathered my will and smashed it against the ward like a hammer, but the give wasn't nearly strong enough. If she managed to get out of here, this was done. And like she'd said, Neshamah would be displeased. Or perhaps disappointed, which seemed like a much more dangerous state of affairs. I couldn't reach my mantle, and the bubble might as well have been stone. Stone before I'd gotten said mantle, anyway, it was a lot less trouble these days. I still had knives up my sleeves, thanks to Pickler's cunning little contraptions, but if my sword couldn't cut it against the bubble neither would they. The Praesi gathered to move out, the Sentinels making a protective ring around the remaining delegates and the Empress. My fingers clenched. I had no weapon, no power that would work until it was too late. Well, except my fucking 'invisible crossbow', thank you Past Catherine. Wait, *yes*, my invisible crossbow. I didn't physically have one – I'd checked earlier, patted myself down – but it might be a metaphor. Or maybe the sight of me making an ass of myself was a signal for Archer to start shooting, which seemed a lot more likely.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," I called out.

The Empress turned.

"And why is that?" she said.

Ah, humouring me. Nearly always a mistake.

"I'll have to kill you with my secret weapon," I replied.

"Is that so?" she said.

"Evidently," I drawled, "you are disinclined to cooperate. Let us part ways, then."

I brought up my invisible crossbow and fired it right into her throat.

At which point nothing happened.

"I was expecting the Archer to ambush us," Malicia said after a moment.

"Wards prepared?" I asked.

"Several," she replied.

"The plan had a few kinks to work out," I admitted.

If I'd been more prone to assigning sentimentality to the Empress , I would have believed her to be somewhat embarrassed on my behalf. Well, it'd make two of us. At least years of Indrani's company had more or less made me immune to shame and public embarrassment. Mercifully, the Dread Empress of Praes set out again without taking a moment out of her day to mock me. All right then, back to forcing my way through the ward and then having a spot of diplomatic murder. I pressed my will against the bubble again, and kept the pressure up. I was gaining ground, inch by inch, but it was taking too godsdamned long.

The arrow took Galadan right in the knee.

The mage fell with a scream as my eyes widened in surprise. Had there been some sort of protective enchantment on him, like there'd been on the Exiled Prince? Why else would Archer aim for the knee? Unless...

"Oh, fucking Hells," I sighed. "She's drunk, isn't she?"

Had she seriously been so wasted she'd missed both the signal and her mark? Gods, I didn't even know Named could *get* that drunk.

"Fighting retreat," Malicia ordered, tone perfectly even.

"Archer," I yelled. "The mages around me. Ignore the Empress."

I found fear in the eye of the warlock closest to me when I met them, and redoubled my efforts to break through. Except that no other arrow came. Was this a plan of some sort? Befuddlement distracted me long enough I lost a few inches to the mages, and I threw myself back into it with gritted teeth. She and I would have a talk about this, when – the second arrow clipped the shoulder of a mage to the side of the bubble, drawing blood and a scream but nothing else. I gained back the inches I'd lost, but that was all. Gods, how drunk was she? *No, she'd have burned it out of her body by now with her Name.* Indrani might capricious, but she was also incredibly vain about her marksmanship. After missing her first shot she'd have sobered herself up. I came to the conclusion a heartbeat before the Empress announced it out loud to her escorts. This had never been Archer. This was Thief who'd stolen a bow and arrows at some point, and the shots were missing because *no one had ever taught her to use the godsdamned thing properly*.

"Thief, just stab the bastards," I yelled angrily.

Her ruse – passing for Archer – had slowed down the Praesi advance some but not nearly enough. She should have gone for the mages since the start, though charitably I'd assume she'd been trying to make time for me to break out of the bubble. I slammed my will against the ward, to no avail. This was infuriating. If I'd still had an aspect I could have ripped through that like wet parchment. But with the mantle's power had come the mantle's weaknesses. Although, I'd learned necromancy when I was still... No, my tie to Zombie still existed but it was muted. I couldn't control her through it. Neither could I summon the arguably more dangerous dead thing at my beck and call, Akua Sahelian. It was like the bubble was shutting me out of Winter and essentially everything outside of the bubble itself. I was pretty sure I could still manipulate what was in here, but my body couldn't shift without Winter to handle the changes and, and I still had a bit of Winter in here didn't I? I glanced down at my sword. I'd gone through over a dozen of those fighting the Skein, just making another one out of ice every time the last one shattered. It'd become so natural I barely ever thought of it anymore. I grimaced. Didn't really help, though. I could make an ice javelin out of that, but that was no better than a sword and I doubted anything aside from my domain would put a hole in the ward.

Thief flickered into sight, stabbing into the back of the man whose eyes I'd met earlier, but even though she drew blood a streak of lighting caught her in the side and smashed her to the ground. An illusion broke, and a fifth spellcaster flicked her wrist as she whispered in the mage tongue. The lightning kept roiling and Vivienne screamed as she twisted on the ground.

"Flee," I hissed. "*Go*."

Except she couldn't, and I didn't have the tools to... My fingers clenched. I gathered my will, sent it into my sword and broke it apart. I ripped from the ice the stuff of Winter, and from it wove one of the few things that never left my body. A small dark whistle, pulsing with power not my own. Power I'd stolen from a hated foe. Bringing it to my cold lips, I blew out and the power vanished. It broke into fine powder. Not a sound had been made. It wasn't that kind of whistle. It wasn't that kind of call**.**

"She's summoning something," the sorceress that still poured lightning into Vivienne called out.

"We need every single one of us," the man who'd been stabbed replied in Mtethwa. "She's a monster."

The blade went through the back of his head, coming out of his month in a downpour of blood. Larat clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Now now, man-thing," he chided. "That's just no way to speak about your superiors."

The rest of the Wild Hunt tore out of Arcadia behind him, and with a wild scream I finally shattered the ward. Finally.

My turn.

Chapter 47

Culmination

> "Do not call a man loyal who still draws breath."
>
> Dread Emperor Terribilis II

There'd be no replacing the whistle, and I'd long ago resolved to keep it for a particularly black day, but there'd be no replacing Thief either. I stood by my decision. What had once been Akua's aspect had yanked the entirety of the Wild Hunt through Keter's wards and whatever other nasty surprises Neshamah had awaiting people trying to reach his city through otherworldly means, unharmed. I'd address the Wild Hunt in a moment, though. I had a set of scales to even first. The sorceress who'd been breaking Thief apart had hastily ended her spell when the fae came out of nothingness, then panicked when I broke the ward. The remaining three casters that'd been keeping me imprisoned staggered at the backlash, and in that moment I acted. One step, the sorceress raised a hand towards me. Two steps, her lips began to form a syllable in the mage tongue. Three steps, my fingers clasper her wrist and with a sharp squeeze I shattered every bone. Face paling, she mastered the pain and got the first word of her incantation out. Four steps, I pivoted and my elbow ploughed into her throat. The windpipe was crushed instantly, and as she choked and fell I straightened and gently set my hands against her temples.

One simple twist, and the neck broke with a crack.

"Thief, get out of here," I called out calmly. "Hear me now, Rider of the Hunt: no prisoners."

That was the kind of feast the Wild Hunt lived for, and they wasted no time digging in. Larat had hacked through the heads of two of my former jailors within a heartbeat of my finishing the order, grinning nastily, and the rest of them charged with wild hoots as they fell upon Malicia and her men. Vivienne tried to get up but her limbs were shaking too badly. I cursed under my breath – I might be able to walk off mage lightning, these days, but my companions were another story – and strode over to help her up.

"Will you be able to escape on your own?" I softly asked.

"Just give me a moment," she rasped. "I still feel like my skin is on fire."

She was burned badly, skin charred in strange patterns all over her body where the lightning had struck, and for a Named she'd always been on the fragile side of the scale. Not for the first time, I mourned that none of my powers were geared towards healing in the slightest. But Thief was wounded, not crippled, and I trusted she had the will to press on after the worst of it passed. Letting out a laboured breath, she pushed me away.

"Kill the Empress," she said. "I'll live."

She'd do more than that, if I had anything to say about it. The moment Masego had healed her back up to fighting fit, I was going to teach her to hold her own in a fight if it was the last thing I did. For too long I'd waved the matter away, dismissed as largely unimportant since she wouldn't be fighting on the frontlines anyway. That'd been naïve, and in retrospective a very dangerous kind of arrogance. We wouldn't always get to dictate the nature of our fights with our ever-rising count of enemies. Today had been a harsh reminder that Vivienne's lack of skills with arms wasn't just fuel for verbal roughhousing, it was a dangerous liability.

"Keep out of sight," I ordered, keeping the thoughts away from my face.

The entire aside couldn't have taken more than a few moments, yet in that span the skirmish had already turned into a siege in miniature. The last of my surviving jailors was dead, his corpse impaled atop the lance of a dark-skinned fae who carried it along like some sort of gruesome trophy. Yet the Empress' people had responded to the appearance of the fae with the steady hands of veteran killers. Colourful curtains of light had been spawned, overlapping and forming a sort of six-cornered shield over the entire delegation, and still a pair of Malicia's warlocks were casting. The Hunt had not laid idle, of course. It tested the defences, but found blades and spears could not breach it, nor could the fae sorceries at their disposal. I recognized the wards, or part of them at least. Akua had used similar ones, called them 'revolving wards'. A common innovation of her and her father's, crafted to deal with the powerful but terribly direct sorceries of the Summer Court. I was less than surprised Malicia's people had gotten their hands on the ward schematics, or adapted them to her purposes. And yet I was not worried, because one fact stood above all: the Praesi were defending, but they were no longer moving. No matter how tall the walls, fortresses always fell. Larat joined me as I strode towards the front, blade dripping with blood.

"A most pleasant excursion, my queen," he mused. "Shall we give the dead a taste of our mettle as well, after these vagrants have been cleared out?"

"We're not picking a fight with the Dead King," I flatly said. "He makes sport of the kind of people that bled you when we assaulted the Proceran camp. Behave, Hunstman."

"I always do," Larat assured me with a too-wide smile. "My fellow riders are chipping away at this lovely turtle shell, one sliver at a time. Patience will deliver us the promised deaths."

"Let's see if I can quicken that," I replied.

The Empress had holed up behind a fortress, hadn't she? I could batter away at it, sure enough, but Black had always told me that the most dangerous of all siege weapons was a mule carrying gold and a promise. I cast a look at the Empress' people, looking for a weak link. None to be found, sadly. They were all calm confidence incarnate. Didn't matter, though. The masks were pretty enough, but I could smell fear's dark stirrings beneath them. The Wild Hunt parted for me, and standing before the Praesi I cleared my throat.

"The first three to surrender get to keep their lives," I announced. "Excluding Malicia. I'll swear binding oath to it, with an agreed-upon phrasing."

None replied, but I saw eyes narrow. Yeah, that was sounding quite tempting at the moment wasn't it? Praesi loyalty was something of a contradictory term.

"An empty offer," the Empress said. "She cannot breach the wards. Regardless, there would be immediate consequences to such a decision."

The Sentinels stirred to drive the point home. She'd not accused me of lying, because she wasn't a fool: these were mostly practitioners, so they knew I had enough fae in me I couldn't break an oath even if I wanted to. As long as the phrasing held, which was on them, they'd be spared. So instead she was playing on fear and pride. For once, the battlegrounds were familiar to the both of us.

"You thought that about the last set of wards," I said. "Look behind me. There's a few corpses telling you otherwise. Sure, she could turn the Sentinels on you, but the moment the bubble is down she'll have bigger problems than you. Is she really going to attempt an execution when she's up to her neck in the likes of this guy?"

I pointed a thumb a Larat. The fae who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall idly touched the blood on his sword and brought it to his lips, licking it off with relish. As far as I knew he didn't, uh, actually drink blood so that was purely to fuck with their heads. Good show, my treacherous lieutenant.

"This is not my true body," Malicia reminded them.

She did not need elaborate on the possible consequences of betraying a still-living Empress. There was an entire hall of forever-screaming heads in the Tower that served as a constant reminder. And still, the pair of warlocks who'd been casting had stopped. Momentum was on my side.

"Sure, she rules for now," I said. "How long is that going to last? She's yet to win a battle and most her army's deserted to other banners. Spend a year or two in Mercantis, wait it out, and you can come back to the Tower to make nice with her successor able to boast you turned on her. Hells, if you've got issues with Mercantis I'll find you something to do in Callow. I've always a need for mages, and the pay will be generous. I'm sure most of you have respect for Malicia. It's not unearned."

I paused and smiled thinly.

"Are you really willing to die defending that hill, though? Because if I have to breach this ward myself, I'll not be in the mood for easy deaths."

"I would keep a few as playthings, my queen," Larat added cheerfully. "It has been ages, since we've had proper entertainment."

I shrugged, watching the faces of the Praesi.

"My mercy has a time limit, ladies and gentlemen," I said. "Now's not the moment for hesitation."

I met Malicia's eyes calmly. There was no appreciation for what I'd done there to be found, not when it was turned against her. The Empress paid lip service to the treasured Wasteland principle of 'iron sharpens iron', but when it came down to it she never settled for anything less than a victory. No matter how long that victory took to snatch. If it was Callowans I was dealing with, one of them would have cursed and folded. But I was dealing with Praesi, a people that had turned betrayal into art back when most of Calernia still used iron. One of the curtains vanished, and a Soninke in robes ran for it. That first betrayal was the collapse of the dam, no one wanting to be the soul that didn't qualify as one of the first three, and within a heartbeat all the curtains of light save one were gone. A loyalist, how quaint.

"Kill," I ordered the Hunt.

I had no intention of offering any of them safe harbour in Callow, and they really should have extracted the oath before turning on Malicia. They'd feared the Sentinels both too much and not enough. The Empress stood tall and proud in a man's body even as it all went to the Hells around her. I advanced, slowly but surely. The Tower's personal guards held the fae back, long enough that one of the traitors turned her cloak again and began reinforcing the ward, but a silver arrow took her through the throat and that was the end of that. The Sentinels began to break. Their armour held against even fae armaments, and their blades scythed down a handful of fairies, but lances and swords and arrows found weaknesses and exploited them ruthlessly. The fleeing Praesi were ridden down mercilessly, until all that remained standing was the Empress and a single sweating mage. I suspected the Hunt could have torn through that ward easy as turning a hand, but it had been left to me by the twisted fae understanding of respect.

"I wonder," I said, looking Malicia's simulacrum in the eyes, "if I can reach you in Ater through this puppet of flesh. Shall we find out?"

She met my gaze unflinching.

"No," she replied, and the simulacrum dropped.

Ah. Well, that also worked. The last living Praesi turned fearful eyes on me.

"I surrender," she said.

Then the arrow took her in the throat. A perfect arc, one I hadn't seen coming until the last moment and that had sailed right through the last ward unhindered. She was dead before she hit the floor, the light curtain vanished.

"And once again, Archer saves the day," Indrani called out from above.

She was standing on the lower reaches of the pyramid, posing triumphantly bow in hand. Before addressing that – and Gods, was I going to address that

– I walked over to Malicia's living but insensate simulacrum. My boot came down, pulping the skull, and then again over the throat since it usually paid to be thorough. I'd have to clean my boots later, I mused, or the stench would be horrible.

"Indrani, get your ass down here," I screamed.

I turned to look around for Thief, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Vivienne," I said. "Still here?"

The other Callowan winked back into sight, still looking half-dead from her hiding place behind a column.

"Good," I said. "Collect all the corpses. I don't want to risk any surprises. And strip away the Sentinel armour, please. It can take fae blades, it must be worth a fortune."

I would have felt worse about looting the dead if Praes hadn't looted Callow for two decades without a care in the world. I'd call it reparations and leave it at that. Thief weakly nodded, and I left her to the grisly work as Archer pranced her way down her perch. She saluted when she approached, using the wrong hand for a legionary's salute and the wrong angle for a Callowan formal greeting.

"Ready to report, Your Queenliness," she announced.

"Where the Hells have you been?" I asked flatly.

"Doing what you told me to," she mused. "Which was, and I quote 'take a walk and do whatever comes naturally'."

I closed my eyes, pained on a metaphysical level. So she'd been the hidden knife I remembered thinking about in one of those unlocked memories. We must have gambled that without an actual plan about her involvement, she couldn't be predicted by the Skein. Which made sense, but had pretty badly failed. *Starting the fire was two birds with one stones*, I thought. The smoke trail had been bound to get her attention and get her to come running.

"If you spent the entire time drinking and just now shot that woman, I'm docking your pay," I told her as I opened my eyes.

"Hey," she protested. "I did lots of stuff that wasn't drinking. She's my fourth kill of the day. Well, third and a half really."

"Tell me you didn't assault the Dead King's patrol," I asked.

"Nah, they never got close to me," she said. "But while you lot were busy throwing down with the giant rat, the Praesi tried to pull a fast one. At least I think so. Two Sentinels carried out some sleeping woman earlier, so I took care of it."

My brows rose.

"Was it a simulacrum?" I asked. "The woman, I mean."

"Dunno what that is," Archer cheerfully lied. "But if it was, it's double dead. Cut off the head after just to be sure, as is our crew's policy."

Damnably, I could not refute that. The brains and bone shards all over my boot made it impossible.

"I think I'm supposed to congratulate you on a job well done," I said after a moment.

"Oh, it was a labour of love," she dismissed. "But do praise me. Loudly and elaborately."

I did not reply, and allowed the silence to stretch.

"You wench," Archer accused me.

"Namecalling is beneath us," I gravely said.

She flipped me the finger and I smiled.

"You got any idea what we're supposed to do now?" she finally asked.

"I think that –" I paused when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. "Hey, you. Give Thief that corpse."

The dark-skinned fae I'd seen carrying around a dead Praesi on a lance earlier looked quite displeased at the order.

"He's not dead yet," the Rider replied.

"Then finish him off and hand him over," I patiently said.

"It was my kill," the fae protested.

"If I have to come over there to settle this, I'm going to make you *sit* on that fucking lance," I grimly replied.

With ill-grace, the fae ripped out the Praesi's throat and dropped him on Vivienne's feet. I'd have to remember to ask Larat the Rider's name later. That kind of discipline case was best nipped in the bud. I turned back to Archer, who looked rather amused.

"Right, so I think we're supposed to gather at our escape route," I said. "That's where Hierophant and Diabolist will be, anyway. Did you run into Adjutant?"

"On my way here," Archer replied. "That was also where he was headed, though I don't know what that location is."

"Neither do I," I admitted. "But Thief should. We'll move out after she's taken all the corpses."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," Indrani said, waggling eyebrows.

Ugh, the wench.

—

Vivienne was well enough to walk at a decent pace without my support by the time we reached our 'escape route', which turned out to be the front of the Silent Palace. The fires had long been put out, but the place was still crawling with undead. Masego was having a pleasant cup of tea at an iron table, a full service having been put out for Akua and Hakram as well. Athal, to my surprise, was seated at the edge of the table as well though unlike the others he was silent. I heard snippets of conversation from the other side of the plaza, snorting when I realized they were having a very civilized debate about the influence of sorcery on the development of the early Dread Empire. Hakram was actually winning, by the sounds of it, which was just delightful in so many ways. Our advance, three Named surrounded by the honour guard of the entire Wild Hunt, hardly went unnoticed. Neshamah's armies gave us

no trouble, which I took to be a good sign. We might have gotten away with murder. Well, murders technically. But it was really the one that mattered. Although, since Archer had killed a puppet as well... I'd never really thought, growing up in Laure, that I would one day have a mental debate about whether you could kill the same person twice. Truly, villainy had expanded my horizons.

"Catherine," Masego greeted me, then glanced at my boots. "You seem to have had an eventful day."

He seemed much better than the last time I'd seen him. The sweat and pallor was gone, though the impression of frailty was not.

"We ran into the Empress," I lightly said. "She'd fallen down some stairs."

Athal's head lowered, hiding his expression.

"What an unfortunate accident," Akua mildly said.

"Indeed," Hakram agreed. "We can only hope the Dead King will be not be too affected by that tragedy to resume negotiations."

I grunted in agreement, dropping into an iron chair on the other side of the table. Vivienne and Indrani followed suit.

"Found Thief for you," I told Athal. "Sorry we didn't stick around for the guards, but I was sure I'd seen her skulking about."

The dark-haired man bowed to me, then offered me a smile.

"It was no trouble, Great Majesty" he said. "I had to interrupt the search myself, as I was given other instructions."

"Oh?" I said. "Anything interesting?"

"Ensuring no bedroom was touched by the flames," he replied. "Though I was told that should you wish for different accommodations this can be arranged."

"We'll be fine," I said.

"He would not participate in our debate," Masego said, almost complaining.

"It's always awkward to enter a conversation after it's already begun," Hakram said, immediately pushing aside the unspoken reprimand.

Unlike Hierophant, he understood the weight of our words towards the servant the Dead King had 'gifted' me. The Wild Hunt settled around us as an honour guard of sorts, valiantly ignoring the pretty salacious jokes Indrani was making about fae flexibility and its many possible applications. I'd been about to reach for a cup of tea myself, when Athal suddenly left his chair to kneel and press his forehead against the floor. I looked to the direction he was facing and my eyes widened. A single undead was approaching, which was unusual in and of itself. But what worried me a lot more was the massive... pressure I could feel coming off what looked like a perfectly normal Keteran foot soldier.

It looked like the Dead King had come to visit.

Interlude: Empires

"Spring brings southern weddings and northern burials."

Lycaonese saying

"I am grieved to hear of your disappointment," Athal said, inclining his head.

The smile on the Black Queen's face was a rueful one, tinted with self-mockery. There were times when the ruler of Callow could be difficult to read, such as when she was in the throes of Winter, but under the noonday sun she was an open book.

"Negotiations can fail," the dark-haired woman replied. "I knew it was one of the possible outcomes even before I learned there'd be opposition."

Athal found dismay, in the cast of her face, yet relief as well. The notion of striking bargain in Keter had never sat well with her, had it? Her defeat also brought solace: the knowledge she had toiled greatly to secure alliance, even though she had come short, and that none of the consequences of this day would be lain at her feet in years to come.

"I am sure accommodations will be reached eventually," the dark-haired man said. "No matter is ever set in stone."

"Now you sound like him," the Black Queen said, rolling her eyes. "I can realize when I've been outbid. Malicia was always going to be willing to go that extra mile I'd balk at. We'll see in a year whether the Dead King feels like riding a different horse."

The Crown had hinted at later arrangements, then. Interesting, considering the depth of the treaties involved. It would have been useful to learn more, but it was not Athal's place to inquire. He was only a servant, after all.

"As you say, Great Majesty," he agreed. "Might I inquire as to when we will depart?"

The Black Queen's brow rose.

"We?" she echoed.

Athal inclined his head again.

"I was gifted to you upon your arrival to the city," he gently reminded her. "It is only natural, as your property, that you would now dispose of my days as you see fit."

She did not quite succeed at hiding the flicker of anger and disgust that crossed her face. The Callowan had a deep and abiding distaste for slavery, as most of Calernia professed to share. It was largely a pretence, of course. Ashurans worked foreign prisoners to death in their mines and fields, having 'bought the span of the sentence' from other nations. Half the Free Cities either practiced slavery openly or through a very thin veil, and across large swaths of Procer the sacred rights of commoners as championed by the House of Light were more aspiration that fact. As for Praes, well, the hatred for the practice learned at Miezan hands had rarely given pause to Tyrants who needed greenskin 'tribute labour' to carry out their grand enterprises. Even the old Kingdom of Callow had not been above occasionally clapping chains on captured legionaries and putting them to work. It was a genuine thing in the Black Queen, however, a charming sort of naiveté for one who had risen to wear a crown.

"I'm freeing you as of right now," the young woman said, and clapped his shoulder gently. "That should be within my rights, I think. And you're certainly welcome to tag along, if you want."

Athal allowed hesitation to touch his face.

"And where would we be headed, Great Majesty?" he asked.

"Callow," she said. "Back home."

That'd been a lie, he thought. The tells were there, though much harder to pick up on than before. There must have been more to her short conversation with the herald of the Crown than a mere dismissal.

"It would be my honour to follow you," Athal said, fear and reluctance trembling artfully.

The Black Queen sighed.

"I'm not going to make you, Athal," she said patiently. "I genuinely think you'll be better off with us, but I can see why you wouldn't want to leave and I'm not going to force you. I meant it, when I said you're free. You can decide for yourself."

The dark-haired man looked away and towards the floor, pose submissive. Following her would be disastrous and he had no intention whatsoever of doing so, yet it would be impolite to outright dismiss her good intentions without the pretence of silent debate. After a few moments, he met her eyes.

"This is my world, Great Majesty," Athal admitted. "I would not leave it."

The dark-haired woman looked saddened but not surprised.

"I guessed that'd be your answer," she said. "You were a kind and pleasant host, Athal. I hope you'll be treated as you deserve here."

The dark-haired man smiled.

"Of this, I have no doubt," he said.

Her answering smile was slightly stiff, for she clearly thought him a slave in all but name.

"Then this if farewell, Athal the Host," Catherine Foundling said, cool dark eyes taking him in. "May we meet as friends, one day."

"Peace be on you, Great Majesty," Athal quietly replied.

She did not linger after that last goodbye, cleanly cutting ties. Not so prone as attachments as she'd once been believed to be, then. Rule of Callow might very well gave fostered that in her: once could not meet a hundred different faces a day and remain caring of all of them. Athal was a good host and a polite servant, and so remained standing until she'd mounted her dead horse and began leading her party towards the gates of Keter. A handful of the Splendid cast lingering gazes at his form, yet none acted or spoke a word. The Black Queen had disciplined them into at least the semblance of civility and obedience, though it would only ever be that. The likes of them could not change their nature, sooner or later it would tell. Even after the last of them was gone from sight, Athal remained standing there in silence. Quietly observed by a thousand dead eyes.

Then, calmly, Dread Empress Malicia emerged from the bundle in her mind that was her impersonation of a Keteran servant and became herself again.

"Quite the interesting day," she murmured, adjusting the white robes her simulacrum had been provided.

The Empress had never enjoyed wearing a man's body, nor would she grow used to it. The flesh construct was much less sensitive than a true human would be, of course – Nefarious had discovered early in his research that to build the receptacle otherwise would make the experience quite overwhelming – but the overall sensation was still quite alienating. Malicia usually wore a woman not merely to draw the eye away from the fact that gender was no consideration to the ritual. Shifting from her true body to another several consecutive times had been quite exhausting, but it should not be of dramatic import. The negotiations with the Dead King were at an end, after all, with only formalities remaining. Having come out the victor out of her little tussle with Catherine had proved her to be the worthiest interlocutor for the Hidden Horror. The Empress cast a haughty glance at an approaching undead, allowing it to kneel before her without comment.

"Your Dread Majesty," it said. "The Crown is now ready to receive you."

"That would be agreeable," Malicia said. "You may escort me."

The Dread Empress used the length of the walk to put herself in order. There would be need, over the coming days, to reconsider the events of the day with Ime and her finest practitioners in attendance. Much had been revealed in the way Catherine attempted her assassination, likely more than the younger woman had intended to offer. For one, Malicia now had a much clearer account of the combat capacity of the Woe. The Adjutant was no great threat on his own and the Thief almost laughably easy to handle, yet the Hierophant needed reassessment. In sheer amount of destructive power at his disposal, he was leagues above what Wekesa had been able to unleash at the same age. He was also much less well-rounded than a young Warlock, and quite easier to exhaust. It was useful to know what the young man could likely be captured if it proved necessary even if Wekesa did not deign to intervene. Killing him

had never been on the table, as Warlock would never forgive her for it. Enough of Malicia's attention remained on her surroundings that she did not need a reminder to emerge from her thoughts when she neared the throne room of the Hall of the Dead. Acknowledging her escort's introduction with a simple glance, she strode forward.

"Elegantly done," the Dead King said, eschewing greetings for praise.

The Hidden Horror lounged on his throne nonchalantly, radiating power without needing to move a single finger. Malicia had never been cowed by the display: she had lived in the Tower for decades now. She slept a mere handful of floors from centuries of the worst of her people's madness contained by wards and steel.

"I was allowed the opportunity to weave as I would," the Empress replied with a smile.

It had still been too close to her liking. Malicia had not expected for her contingency body to be found as well, Archer of the Woe having been marauding about the city instead of joining her companions in fighting the Dead King's guardians. Still, she'd been granted advantages. A guise that would make her adjacent to her opponent's deepest council, liberty to prepare however she deemed necessary for months before Catherine's arrival. Crafting the personality of 'Athal' had been the work of long hours enabled only by the Hidden Horror's willingness to allow her to interrogate his Hosts.

"She's still young," the Dead King mused. "In need of greater tempering. She should have killed every living soul in the city just to be certain. It will be a good lesson for her."

"As you say," Malicia smiled.

She believed the old monster had not ever meant for Catherine to succeed here. The point of the exercise, she suspected, had been to mould the young woman through conflict. Handpicked opponents in very specific locales to bring about a certain... enlightenment. It had not escaped Malicia's notice that Catherine could not turn to mist as she wished. The capacity had always been there, of course, but the *mentality* had not. The Black Queen was being guided towards a path. Though the Empress would make alliance with the Dead King today, she knew better than to think it any sort of friendship. It was quite likely that even as they made pact, the Hidden Horror had lit a sharper and tossed back into Callow. Measures would need to be taken, beyond even those she had already set in motion. It was rather worrying that the other woman would not be immediately returning to Callow, as Malicia had predicted she would. The Black Queen still believe she had cards to play.

"Shall we deal with the formalities?" the Dead King offered.

"Let us," the Empress agreed.

Before the day was done, she would have an alliance signed in blood.

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"By all means," Cordelia Hasenbach said with frigid politeness," do explain to me how sixteen thousand vagabonds succeeded in sacking the largest cities

of Cantal, *including the capital*. I await what will no doubt be an enlightening answer."

The First Prince knew she should moderate her tone when speaking the to the handful of men and women who'd been commanding the defence of the Principate's heartlands. Anger was rarely constructive, only to be used as a demonstration of displeasure when facing a soft position. If anger bared could not change the decision being made, there was no purpose in displaying it. Yet, looking at the five officers before her, the blonde ruler could not bring herself to lessen the ice in her voice. These fools had, while assuring her every step of the way that the legions under the Black Knight were being herded and encircled, somehow allowed a foreign army to burn a swath of destruction through every Cantalese region of logistical import unimpeded.

"Your Most Serene Highness, I will not deny we have failed you," the oldest among the officers admitted.

Diego Altraste, a highly-recommended captain from Valencis she'd granted the command of all available hosts in the heartlands to. Moustachioed, eloquent and boisterous, as Arlesite men so often were, yet he now sat subdued.

"The recognition of that is noted, yet no the reason for this council," Cordelia said, forcing a semblance of clam into her tone. "Cantal has been crippled for a decade, my captains, by a force I was told was quite contained. How did this come to be?"

"We cannot be blamed," a young woman protested. "The easterners are resorting to impious powers, it is not properly conducted warfare."

Captain Lehmer was, to the First Prince's private disappointment, Lycaonese by birth. She should have known better that to expect *properly conducted warfare* from the Enemy.

"I wonder then, captain," Cordelia replied softly, "where the blame should be laid?"

There was heavy silence at that. Altraste cleared his throat.

"We failed to anticipate the change in their operational tempo," the Valencian said. "Overnight and without warning, they began to cover three day's marching distance in a single night. We'd planned the movement of our forces according to the previous order, and so were caught flat-footed."

"And have we found the reason for this sudden change?" Cordelia asked.

"Nothing concrete," an old man with a heavy Alamans accent said. "We lack eyes within the legions. But I have a theory. The Black Knight ceased participating in fighting engagements after they sped up, so I believe it to be an aspect of his Damnation. Using it this much likely exhausts the man extraordinarily."

Alphonse de Saliverne had been commander of the Salian garrison for over forty years now, and though he was only a passable field commander Cordelia held his learning in great esteem. His words had weight.

"They're also listening in on everything the mages send by scrying," Altraste added reluctantly, as wary of her reaction. "The Order has become something

of a liability, Your Highness, even when speaking in coded languages. They've danced too neatly around our delaying forces for it to be coincidence."

The Order of the Red Lion had been Cordelia's own notion, and raised by her own decree. The man was being cautious not to offend even while trying to point out a crippling weakness. She could appreciate his discretion in the matter.

"Keep using them," the First Prince said. "As a red herring. If we must resume instructions sent by horse, so be it. They cannot be allowed to continue their march."

"That will be difficult," Captain Alphonse replied. "As of the last report, they are headed towards Iserre. The southern reinforcements from Levant could be sent to meet them, but if they break cities at the pace they have so far most of northern Iserre will be lost before battle can be given."

"Prince Amadis stripped the principality clean of soldiers and weapons," Altraste added. "There are too few fighting men to raise a proper levy, much less arm it."

"Iserre cannot be allowed to burn," Cordelia said, tone forcefully even.

It would be a disaster, and not only because one of the few principalities left largely untouched by the Proceran civil war would be put to the torch. The Carrion Lord was wielding his army as a political knife, it'd become clear. Bayeux had been spared the kind of destruction visited on Cantal, and she knew very well why. The Black Knight was, for the eyes of all Procer, brutalizing the lands of her opposition in the Highest Assembly. Worse, he was doing so after her own uncle had allowed him to march without pursuit. The ploy was obvious, of course. There were few in the Principate that would truly believe her to be in collusion with the likes of the Carrion Lord. It was, however, a very good excuse for any prince and princess wishing to turn on her to do so. Amadis Milenan had been lionized a martyr for his voluntary exile in Callow, and if his lands were put to the torch in his absence... Cordelia's popularity had reached an apex, after the declaration of the Tenth Crusade, but it was now melting like snow in the sun. That she would be forced to abdicate remained unlikely, but it was no longer a possibility she could outright dismiss. A servant in her line's own livery and not the palace's came to stand behind her, presence announced without a word. The First Prince angled her head towards him in an unspoken invitation.

"The evening is upon us, Your Most Serene Highness," the man murmured.

The Lycaonese's eyes flicked to the tall panes of glass overlooking Salia that led to her council room's balcony. The sun was beginning to set, and she had appointment to keep. The First Prince turned her gaze to her assembled captains.

"I will require that a plan for the defence of Iserre be formulated," she ordered. "A particular eye being cast on the need to preserve as much of the principality as feasible. Do not hesitate to request any manner of men or resources. You will have the full weight of my authority behind you."

It galled her that she might have to trade favours and dent the treasury in the defence of the ancestral holdings of Amadis Milenan, yet beyond the ugly political requirements she had a duty to the Iserrans. They were her subjects, like any other, and not to be held at fault for the plotting of their anointed ruler. The First Prince spent longer than strictly required to take her leave with courtesy, carefully soothing any feathers her earlier anger might have ruffled. Already she regretted the loss of control. Her handmaidens undressed her and then helped her into her formal regalia as she perused the latest word out of Callow. The Black Queen and the Woe had left the kingdom, that much had been confirmed. Where they had headed, however, was still a guessing game. Cordelia had previously suspected that she would join up the with the Black Knight and use the man as a way to damage the Principate while preserving her own forces, yet it had not come to pass. Most likely, she had gone to treat with the League of Free Cities. The First Prince could not be certain, as the Tyrant of Helike had thoroughly purged most of her spies and paid informants in the upper rungs of the region, yet there were few other alliances left for her to seek. Agnes had been quite clear that doom was gathering south, and the League's intentions were damnably opaque.

Three hours after sunset, Cordelia sat in the hidden room she'd had arranged for this sole purpose. Behind her seat the trinket sent by the Black Queen awaited the touch of the warlord's eldritch power to take them both into that world of shadows. The First Prince found her centre, allowing calm to take hold of her, and waited until the holy artefacts provided by the House of Light began to burn. Night fell over the room easy as the snap of fingers, suddenly and entirely. It took a moment for the First Prince to reorient herself in this dismaying realm, eyes falling on the Black Queen facing her. The coolness of this place had her glad regal wear in even southern Procer preferred long sleeves. Catherine Foundling was not beautiful, she'd always thought. Some might call her striking, but Cordelia found her features too sharp and sullen for it. It was her eyes that softened her mien, surprisingly expressive brown orbs set in a tanned face. As always, the would-be Queen of Callow disdained the trappings of the title she claimed to wear unremarkable plate.

"Hasenbach," the Black Queen said. "We need to talk."

The First Prince considered her opposite with cool eyes. This lack of courtesy should not go unremarked upon. Though this was an informal conference, Cordelia disliked the pretence of friendship between them that would allow such language.

"Have your courtesies left you entirely?" the First Prince asked.

A smile flickered across the other woman's face, gone in a heartbeat. The Lycaonese had read no fewer than seven assessments of Catherine Foundling gathered from hearsay, observation and old acquaintances. They had been of little use in understanding the Black Queen's personality. The girl she'd been before becoming the Squire had been smothered swiftly by the Black Knight's tutelage, and the callous warlord that'd fought in the Liesse Rebellion and

Akua's Folly had never sat across from Cordelia either. The Doom of Liesse had cast a deep shadow on the other woman, Cordelia felt, and changed in sundry ways. Still, some similarities remained. Foundling respected strength above all, like most warlords, though unlike most of those she responded well to confrontation. She enjoyed 'spirit', even in her foes. Her temper was also quite easy to provoke, which had allowed Cordelia to prod her along desired paths in the past.

"I've had a long few days," the Black Queen said. "So let's just pretend I danced the dance and move on, because this is me doing you a favour and I'm done smiling all pretty."

The First Prince forced her face to remain perfectly still. Revealing irritation would serve no purpose, at the moment.

"A favour," she said instead. "You make a strange foe, it must be said."

"You're amused," Foundling shrugged, misreading her entirely. "That's about to go away real quick. Congratulations, First Prince: the Dead King's about to invade."

Cordelia's blood went cold. She studied the Callowan carefully, looking for signs of dishonesty. She found none.

"You have made a pact with the Hidden Horror," the First Prince said, voice cold and cutting.

"Not me," the Black Queen replied. "Malicia."

The Empress? It was possible, Cordelia thought, the Tower was certainly desperate enough, yet-

"Well, I suppose we're done here," Founding casually said. "We're still at war, after all. Good luck, try not to screw it up for all of us."

The warlord raised her hand, as if to dismiss the darkness, and the blonde woman's fingers tightened against the arms of her chair until they turned white.

"Wait," she said.

The utterance had been much too desperate for her tastes, yet she couldn't simply let Foundling end it there. She needed to know more or thousand would die. The Black Queen eyed her the way a wolf eyes a limping deer.

"You know, I was trying to think of a reason for it earlier," Foundling said. "To give you more than a warning, I mean. Then I realized I genuinely *couldn't*. I'm not rejoicing at the loss of lives, mind you, but at the end of the day you're trying to fucking invade me even as we speak."

"A victorious Dead King would turn his eyes on you," Cordelia said, regaining her calm.

As long as the conversation continued, she could convince the other woman.

"Your eyes are on me *right now*, Cordelia," the Black Queen noted. "You expect me to lend a hand to people trying to conquer my homeland? Good night."

Her hand rose again but the First Prince knew that for the tactic it was. Foundling was attempting a bargain, now that there was another enemy on the field.

"Are you truly willing to mother the slaughter of thousands out of petty arrogance?" Cordelia accused.

The other woman's eyes went cold.

"There is more at stake," she replied softly, "than you know."

The irony was sharp, her own word thrown back at her. The Lycaonese drew back in fury, but something in the Black Queen's eyes gave her pause. For all that Catherine Foundling ruled with Wasteland methods, in that moment Cordelia was not looking at the Black Knight's pupil or Malicia's mistake. She was looking at raw Callowan spite, coursing deep and dark. *For small slight, long prices.*

"He will devour all of us," the First Prince said.

"Aye, maybe he will," the Black Queen said. "So we'll speak again, after your people do some of the bleeding for a change."

"This will not be forgot," Cordelia said coldly.

"I would hope not," Catherine Foundling replied with a hard smile. "A last word of warning, Your Most Serene Highness. If your uncle's army is still digging at the end of the month, there will be consequences. I've yet to run out of lakes to drop."

The darkness went away, and the First Prince of Procer was left with nothing but fury and fear. *Doom to the north*, Agnes had said.

She was never wrong.

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Neshamah's foot scuffed the stone.

Such a slight sound, barely more than a whisper. He'd not heard it in a very, very long time. Obsidian hummed behind him as the Dead King tread Creation once more. He inhaled, though this body hardly had need for it. Sorceries millennia old lent him sense of smell, or close enough. The scent of cool stone and dust was a pleasing thing. Hearing had been much easier to reproduce, a staple of undeath even in his lifetime, and his was sharper than a mortal's. The sound of a bottle being uncorked drifted to his ear, and he turned towards it without the slightest hint of surprise. This was more than expected. It had been *awaited*.

"Going for a walk, old friend?" the Intercessor grinned, toasting him with a bottle.

He paid no heed to her current guise. She had worn many a face, over the centuries. Enough he could no longer remember them all, or the names paired with them. It made no difference. She was as he was, more essence than form.

"It has been too long," he said, voice pensive. "The Serenity remains a lacking imitation. There is a... taste to Creation. A skilled pupil I may be, yet a pupil still."

She drank deep, as had always been her game. He'd caught her, once, back when the upstarts Miezans had still fancied themselves more than guests on the shores. Carved her open, ever careful to avoid even the semblance of fatality, to see what lay inside. She'd mocked him even as the tongs kept open her ribcage and he studied her organs, perplexed by their lifelikeness. He had learned little from the study, never even confirming whether she truly grew drunk. If her body was a construct, it was so perfect one there was no telling the difference.

"You have your games even from your hiding hole," the Intercessor laughed. "Quite the entertainment, this time."

Neshamah strode forward, enjoying the pressure of a word he could not simply shape as he wished. There was resistance here. A will more paramount than his own.

"Were you watching?" he teased.

A little jest, just between the two of them. She was always watching.

"It was oddly nostalgic," the Intercessor mused. "You know, watching you meddle with forces beyond your comprehension. You haven't been that reckless since... your fourth century, I'd say? That delightful scuffle with the rats."

"I was young," Neshamah fondly remembered. "And still believed plagues to be valid method. You were quite severe in chiding me, I recall."

"Lines had to be drawn, we were still establishing the rules," the Intercessor smiled. "Both of us played rougher back then."

"You certainly were not shy in setting the elves after me," Neshamah said. "That was rather unwarranted."

"You were being greedy," the Intercessor said, wagging a finger. "Two Hells? I don't think so. Besides, that was as much about that old mule in the Bloom as it was about you. He needed a sharp lesson about who not to trifle with, and your taking his only son got the point across."

"The Spellblade has been a delightful diversion, admittedly," Neshamah conceded.

"You even set him on dear Cat," she said. "Thoughtful of you."

She drank again, under the Dead King's yellow gaze. Ah, she was miffed. She would be.

"I did look into her," he said. "She's no work of yours, which I found fascinating."

"We don't all work with ponds, Neshamah," the Intercessor said. "There's a lot more moving parts out here than in your little walled garden."

"And yet you have not snuffed her out," he mused. "Oh, you made attempts. Yet I know your work. It was not her throat you truly sought to cut."

"Flipped the story on her several times," she said. "She takes to it like a fish. I'm impressed. She's no great thinker, mind you, but her instincts are sharp. It'd be more trouble than it's worth to rid myself of her. She's the kind you let burn out on their own."

The thing shaped like a woman paused, ever theatrical.

"Or at least so I thought. You're making me reconsider."

"I wonder," Neshamah murmured. "It this meant to tempt me to invest more only to then yank the rug, or is this trickery to make me abandon an opening?"

The Intercessor grinned wide and sharp over the bottle's rim.

"Wanna roll the dice?" she offered. "I promise not to cheat this time."

"You say that every time," the Dead King reminded her laughingly. "No, old friend, you will not goad more out of me. I have allowed her to glimpse the threshold. She will rise or fall of her own merit."

"You've been so wary, since Triumphant," the Intercessor complained.

"And yet here I am," Neshamah replied easily. "Returned to Creation. Let us not pretend you did not nudge that story along."

"What can I say?" she shrugged. "I've been missing your company."

"Such a sentimental creature," the Dead King sighed, then his eyes turned sharp. "S what am I to be this time, Intercessor? The hammer or the anvil?"

She drank deep, throat bobbing as the red wine ran down her chin. She dropped the bottle afterwards, let it bounce off the stone and spill the rest.

"All right," she said cheerfully, "so stop me if you've heard this one before, but there's a joke from Levant I just *love*. So three princes – one Arlesite, one Alamans and one Lycaonese – and the Dead King walk into a tavern, looking for a hot meal. So the tavern keeper apologizes, says he's out and his last bowl of stew went to the woman in the corner with her baby, maybe they can get it off of her. So the Arlesite prince, he walks up to her, and says 'Good woman, I will duel you for this stew'. She refuses, because really fuck Arlesites. So then the Alamans prince walks up to her and says 'Good woman, as your rightful liege I deserve this stew more than you, hand it over'. She refuses, because she paid her taxes so she doesn't owe shit to no one. So then the Lycaonese prince walks over, looks at the Dead King – that's you! – and goes all grim. He says 'I'm fine with starving, so long as the Dead King doesn't get the stew'. Then the Dead King walks up and says 'You guys can fight over the stew, I'll just-"

"Eat the baby," Neshamah finished, purely for the pleasure of denying her the climax.

The ancient monster pouted.

"So you *do* know it," she said. "Should have told me at the start, I got way into it."

"I assume," the Dead King said, "that this atrocity – and I do not use this word lightly, believe me – of a story had a purpose?"

The Intercessor grinned.

"Of course," she said, wine red as blood trickling down her chin. "*Eat the baby*, King of Death. Just this once, I'll allow it."

Chapter 48

Shadows

> "A passable plan done in a day will nearly always beat an exquisite scheme requiring a month."
>
> Dread Empress Regalia II

Truth be told, I'd never been enamoured with the thought of travelling. Even if I'd never become Black's apprentice I would have left Laure eventually – I'd has plans to attend the War College, what felt like half a lifetime ago – but unlike some of the other girls at the orphanage my heartbeat had never quickened at the notion of journeying across Calernia. There'd been this girl I'd shared a room with, Gods, what'd been her name? Emily, maybe. Something that sounded like that. She'd found work at a street stall near the market just so she could buy a rough map of the continent and plan her travels when she came of age. She'd stolen the only volume of Anabas the Ashuran's travelogues the orphanage had and read it so often the pages had been worn out. That'd never been for me. Having a gander at the most beautiful parts of southern Callow had been appealing, and I'd had vague plans to visit the Duchy of Daoine for as long as I could remember, but my interest in foreign vistas had always been limited.

And yet here I was now, camping with a few companions by the shore of a lake I doubted any human had seen in centuries. Few Praesi maps gave name to the body of water to the northeast of the Kingdom of the Dead, but the Procerans called it the Chalice. There was likely a story there, but not one I knew. It was beautiful, I had to the admit. The poisonous fumes that hung over the Dead King's lands did not reach this far north, leaving me with unimpeded sight of a misty lake with sapphire-blue waters. The beach was pebbles of pale and grey, with the rare splash of colour breaking the mould. The winds were restless, here, and the dawning evening pleasantly cool. Even at noon, when the day was warmest most of the Woe wore cloaks. Unlike me they did not welcome to the touch of the cold. I palmed a stone and sent it skidding across the waters, the final plop surprisingly loud to my ears.

Hakram had dug a fire pit earlier and Indrani was now making some sort of sordid stew out of the fish she'd caught with her bare hands, standing hip-deep in the waters. It felt oddly domestic to watch them bicker around the flames, arguing about how much salt should go in a meal. Vivienne was napping right through it, huddled inside a pile of blankets close enough to the fire to feel the warmth of the flames. The last two had less carefree matters to attend to. I'd asked Masego to reach out to the Observatory the moment my little chat with Cordelia Hasenbach came to an end, but even with Akua as a helper the preparations had taken some time. He'd warned me the ritual had high chances of failure. Though the Whitecaps weren't in the way, up here, the distance was massive. It'd taken three attempts before he succeeded mid-afternoon. Fadila had been there, luckily enough, though what she'd had to tell us had taken the wind right out of me. She only knew so much, though, so I'd ordered the Observatory to serve as a relay for another ritual at dusk. Juniper would know more.

I glanced at the tall tower of ice I'd formed to speak with the First Prince, which now served as the seat of Hierophant's rituals. I could feel the ebb and flow of sorcery within, though it'd not reached that palpable crescendo of active scrying. I tossed another stone and let the sound of Indrani slapping Hakram with a ladle – clearly stolen from the royal kitchens by Vivienne, as it was pure silver and there was a suspicious hole where the Fairfax heraldry would be – until he submitted to her demands of another pinch of salt. It was calming. I was in great need of that, right now. The sun was dipping into the lake with a riot of red and gold, when Akua came for me. She said nothing, scarlet eyes hooded. She'd grown better at reading my moods, when idle talk would grate on my nerves instead of provide appreciated distraction. I passed the others on the way to the ice, waving a hand when Indrani called out, and found Masego crouched on the ground.

"Catherine," he said without turning. "I believe we've stabilized the formula properly. There should be no more troubles."

"Good work," I said.

"They'll be able to feel that as far south as Keter, at least, if they are keeping an eye out," he reminded me.

"Let them," I grunted. "Scry, Masego."

He did not comment any further, tracing a few runes out of light that set the entire array glowing. I ran my fingers across the back of the seat I'd carved myself out of ice before sitting down. A look was enough to dismiss Akua, though Masego remained close. If the ritual had issues, I expected him to intervene. At the centre of the array lay a dark wooden bowl filled with dark waters taken from the Observatory's own pools. A sympathetic connection, I thought, and silently praised myself for remembering the fancy terms. We'd improved somewhat on the usual spell, Hierophant having me weave Winter as he required. When Fadila's face appeared in the bowl, it did in the mirrors surrounding me as well.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing.

"Mbafeno," I mildly replied. "Any issues on your end?"

"Marshal Juniper awaits you," she replied. "Shall I proceed?"

"By all means," I said.

Her face rippled, then vanished, and a heartbeat later I was facing the Hellhound's tired gaze. Juniper looked like she'd been put through a ringer. If half of what Fadila had said, that might very well be the case.

"Juniper," I said. "Been a while."

"Foundling," she gravelled. "I have a dozen fires to put out, so let's skip the courtesies."

I almost replied with a sardonic *lovely to see you too*, but if the situation was as serious as I believed it was no time for banter.

"I had a talk with Fadila Mbafeno earlier today," I said. "But she's constrained to the palace, so most of it was hearsay. I'll need a full report."

The orc nodded.

"The Empire just fucked us hard," Juniper bluntly said. "I can't actually prove it's them, but it has that Wasteland reek."

I grimaced. That'd been Fadila's opinion as well, but I'd hoped she might be wrong.

"How bad was it?" I asked.

"Every member of the King's Council is dead," she said. "Around a third of your court officials. It was a godsdamned massacre."

My fingers clenched.

"Ratface?" I quietly asked.

She shook her head mutely.

"Knife to the back of the neck," she said. "He wouldn't have felt a thing."

I closed my eyes. There was a cold, measured part of me that was furious I'd been robbed of a skilled Lord Treasurer for who I had no real replacement. The rest of me grieved the death of a boy I'd known since we were seventeen, children playing war games in the Tower's shadow. Ratface had been with me since the beginning, since Rat Company. He'd been a friend, one of the few I had left. I inhaled, place the tempest of grief and wrath in a box and set it aside. I opened my eyes, calmed.

"Anne Kendall?" I asked.

"First to go," Juniper said. "We think she was one of the primary targets."

And there went the woman I'd considered my most likely successor to the queenship of Callow. I was slightly appalled that my first thought at hearing the death of Baroness Anne confirmed was how it'd complicate the line of succession, but I would not shy away from the facts. Anne Kendall had been a kind soul, a skilled ruler and if not a friend someone I had deep respect for. A patriot, of that rare breed that put the needs of her people above her own. And she'd been, informally, the closest thing to an acceptable successor I had at my court. Malicia – and this was her work, of that I had no doubt, for it'd been a crippling blow to Callow in too many ways not to be – had ordered her killed

just to weaken my position. Fury flared, but I mastered myself. *Anger is the death of reason. You need a lucid mind to survive, now.*

"Merciless Gods," I finally said. "Who holds Laure?"

"The got the legate I sent to command the garrison and all his staff," Juniper said. "The highest-ranking officer in the city was a Senior Tribune by the name of Abigail. At a guess, they missed her because she was on leave. She's been on the rolls since the Arcadian Campaign, fought under Nauk at the Battle of the Camps."

I frowned.

"I know of her," I said. "She used to serve under Hune, has a Summerholm accent. She's got a handle on the situation?"

"People went to the streets after your court declared martial law," Juniper replied. "So she had the palace cellars emptied and every winesink in the city do the same on the crown's coin."

"She got rioters *drunk*?" I hissed.

"Drunk enough they weren't able to riot," the Hellhound said. "She didn't have the men to enforce the decree, Catherine, and spilling blood would have been like lighting a sharper. She made the best possible decision, even if she overstepped her authority. I'll state that for the record, if I have to."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Fuck it, as long as it worked," I finally said. "How quick can you have a senior officer in the city?"

"At least a month," Juniper said. "We're camped close to Ankou, at the moment, in talks with General Sacker's legion."

I drummed my fingers pensively.

"Promote her to legate, then," I said. "Field promotion, to be confirmed at a later date. She's in charge of Laure until I can send one of the Woe to take over."

"I'll pass it along," the orc said.

Good. It'd been an unorthodox method, but then that was the kind of thinking the Army of Callow encouraged. If she had the mettle for higher rank, she'd get to keep it. Gods knew I was always in desperate need of fresh talent.

"Did they manage to assassinate within the army?" I asked.

"They tried," Juniper said. "Had agents in the ranks, one made it as high as tribune. The Jacks caught most of them. The rest got knifed before they could do any real damage. Lord Black sends his regards."

I chewed on that, split between relief at my teacher still being on my corner and displeasure as the fact he'd infiltrated the Army of Callow deeply enough his people were comfortable fighting Eyes of the Empire.

"You got his people?" I asked.

"They're under arrest," Juniper said. "None resisted, so I used a light touch. Only soft interrogations."

"Try to get anything they know about Malicia's people," I said. "I'll authorize release back to Black if they work with us."

The orc nodded.

"Ranker has expressed willingness to work with us," she told me.

The first bit of good news today, that.

"Her legion got mauled at the Vales," I said.

"She's got more than half in fighting fit," Juniper replied. "More importantly, she's willing to trade goblin munitions for supplies. Including goblinfire."

"Get your hands on anything you can," I ordered. "Had she said anything about the Empress?"

"Said politics don't concern her, since she's part of an Imperial expedition army under the direct command of the Black Knight," my Marshal grunted. "She'd got no intention of heading east, and she'd publicly turned away messengers from the Tower."

"Malicia's still sending diplomats through Callow?" I frowned.

"Not anymore," Juniper said. "It got bloody, Catherine. When word about Laure got out, fresh off that proclamation from Salia? They butchered any Praesi they could get their hands on. We lost legionaries that were on leave."

Fuck. The last thing I needed was Callowans taking swings at the Army of Callow.

"The Tower hasn't formally declared war, has it?" I asked.

"Not a word from the Empress," she said. "But we're having Praesi troubles anyway."

"The High Lords can't possibly be fools enough to pick a fight *now*," I said.

"Worse," the orc replied. "We have refugees coming through the Blessed Isle. Ashur's torching the coast and the sack of Nok displaced thousands. The Wasteland's already rationing, so they're moving west where the food is."

"How many?" I grimly asked.

"Two, three thousand for now," the Marshal of Callow said. "Mostly families. There'll Eyes and assassins among them though, that's a certainty. Farmers have been forcing them to remain near the Isle, by force if need be."

So Malicia was dumping her refugee troubles on me. I supposed from her perspective there was no loss to be had. Either I slaughtered them and became even more reviled in Praes, or I allowed them to stay and had to divert time and resources to force order onto the mess.

"We can't allow them to go deeper into Callow," I said.

"If we don't get them out soon, the numbers will keep growing," Juniper said. "And it's only a matter of time until they get hungry and desperate enough to steal from farmers who won't stand for it. When steel comes out it'll get ugly *fast*."

"Our only host close enough is the Summerholm garrison," I said. "And that's the key to our entire eastern defence. If she's baiting it out to ambush it..."

"I know," the Hellhound growled. "Her belly's unprotected, but so is ours. She's short on legions, but she could order the High Lords of the interior to send their household troops."

The worst part was that I knew exactly what Malicia was doing, but there was no easy solution. She'd shaken Callow just as the Dead King got loose to prevent me from intervening in the war with Procer, and now she was trying to tie down my forces with the least possible effort on her part. If she'd sent an army into Callow, she'd had to feed and fund it. To commit men. Instead she'd mutilated the administration of the kingdom, then dropped a mess at the border on my lap. If I wanted to retaliate, I'd have to venture into the Wasteland. Where every major city was a fortress heavily warded and filled with horrors and it was impossible to live off the land. Hells, she could probably raid my godsdamned supply lines to fill her own granaries. I would have called it utter idiocy to provoke the Kingdom of Callow when she was already fighting a losing war with the Thalassocracy, but I knew my army was in no state for a protracted eastern campaign. I needed it elsewhere, and I needed it to be making up for the losses of the Battle of the Camps. If I acted, I risked incurring a major loss for no real gain. If I did not act, on the other hand, I would keep paying for it.

I was too furious to be admiring.

"Pull back all the people in the Fields to Summerholm," I finally said. "Have them bring every bag of grain and herd of cattle back with them while they do. The refugees won't keep coming if there's nothing to be had."

"And if they head towards Summerholm?" Juniper asked.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," I said. "They're refugees, not a legion marching column. It'll take months."

"That's a stopgap," she said. "Not a fix."

"A stopgap is what we need, right now," I said. "I'll send Thief back to Callow to take control of the situation."

Juniper's broad face grimaced.

"You're not coming back?" she asked.

"We need an army," I said. "The Dead King dealt with Malicia instead, so I'm getting us another."

"The drow," the Hellhound said.

"The drow," I agreed softly. "We're out of alternatives, Juniper. The Principate is about to be hit hard from the north, which at least will buy us time. I need Callow stable, and the army in fighting fit. That falls on you and Thief. I'll return as swiftly as possible with reinforcements."

"There's good news on that front, at least," Juniper announced. "We're drowning in volunteers."

I blinked.

"Even after I was named Arch-heretic of the East?" I said.

"That's what got it started," the orc said. "Half of Ankou's been to our camp to enrol, Catherine. And after the assassinations in Laure it was like a damned

fire was lit. There's formed Royal Guard coming from as far as Holden to enrol, and there's entire convoys on the roads coming towards training camps. Half a year, Warlord. Give me half a year and I'll have you an army that'll shake this fucking continent."

I exhaled softly. They'd cornered us, hadn't they? The Procerans and the Praesi. And the harder they struck, the harder my countrymen would dig their heels.

"Good," I said. "I don't care if you have to empty every treasure vault in Callow, Juniper, I want them armed and trained. The fights around the corner are going to be like nothing we've seen before."

The orc grinned toothily.

"It'll be my pleasure," she said. "That would have been pleasant note to end on, but I have two more messes to pass you."

I sighed.

"I'm listening," I said. "Wait, shit, Prince Amadis and the Pilgrim. Are they. . . "

"No assassin went after them," Juniper said. "But the Pilgrim's a third mess, looked at a certain way. He legged it and left the prince behind. We haven't seen sign of him since the killings."

Shit. Yeah, it made sense. I wasn't there for him to work on, and when we'd last spoken it had been with harsh words. The old man wouldn't sit pretty in Laure while the Dead King was on the move. Even if he was so inclined, the Heavens wouldn't let him.

"That's a breach of our truce terms," I said.

"The Hells can we do about it?" the Hellhound said. "Kill Milenan? It gets us nothing."

Much as it irritated me, she was right. The northern crusaders were out of the passage and they'd likely be headed upwards to delay the Dead King. I did not want to do anything that might affect that decision, not right now anyway.

"Keep him under our thumb," I finally said. "We'll settle accounts with the Peregrine another day. What's the first disaster?"

"Don't know if it's that," Juniper said. "But diplomacy's not my wheelhouse. The Snake Eater Tribe sent volunteers to enrol, but there was an envoy with them. She says she's coming on the behalf of the Council of Matrons."

Well, shit. It wasn't the first time the ruthless old bats made discreet overtures to me. Back before we'd purged the worst of the Regals they matron-attendants that rule the Snake Eater Tribe had interrogated Pickler about what intention I might have for Praes, if I ended up on the winning side of a war with the Empire. There'd been no offer, back then. Malicia had yet to bleed enough the Matrons would consider her easy meat. I suspected that with the Ashurans running rampant across the coast and Black strolling around the Principate with half the Legions of Terror, that'd begun to change.

"What do they want?" I warily asked.

"She wouldn't tell me everything," Juniper replied. "Said she'd deal only with you. But I was given a taste, probably to bring you to the table. The Council of Matrons is offering to begin negotiations over the sale of goblin munitions to the Kingdom of Callow."

My fingers clenched. That was very, very dangerous talk. The Tribes were bound by treaty to sell those only to the Tower, and it wasn't the kind of clause that got a slap on the wrist when broken: it'd be called rebellion, if it got out. Even possession of goblin munitions was illegal in Praes. *Highborn* would have their entire direct family executed if they were caught with a stash.

"Fuck me," I said quietly. "They're preparing to rebel, aren't they?"

"Who the Hells ever knows, with goblins?" the orc grunted. "Does look like it, though. We both know it's been a long time coming."

"And they won't talk with anyone other than me?" I pressed.

"That's what the envoy told me," Juniper said.

Godsdamnit. I couldn't afford to head to Callow right now, no matter how sweet the prize.

"I'll give Thief full authority to negotiate in my name," I said. "If that's not enough, they'll have to wait."

The orc nodded.

"The second thing," she said. "It's the Warlock."

"He's in Callow?" I said, eyed widening.

"He was," Juniper replied. "Long gone by now. He left a message for Hierophant."

"And what would that be?" I flatly asked.

"To head to Thalassina immediately," the orc said. "There's a situation coming to head, and he wants his son there yesterday."

The string of curses I let out at that was foul enough even the Hellhound winced.

Chapter 49

Wrangle

> "Forty-two: should a disagreement lead one of the party to leave, you should expect combat within the week as you will either be captured to be rescued by the departed or the opposite. Let it happen, as a common enemy will heal all internal disputes and you can share a good laugh over the corpse of your nemesis' dead lieutenant."
>
> Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, author unknown

We were pretending it was a spirited debate. It wasn't. These were the bitterest arguments I'd had with the Woe so far, and currently I wasn't winning either of them. Figured. War on two fronts was never a good idea, but it didn't look like I was going to have a choice about it.

"It's a trap, Masego," I said. "You know that as well as I do."

"My father would not harm me," the blind man replied evenly.

"I'm not saying he'll knife you," I said. "I'm saying that if you set foot in the Empire, there's no fucking way Malicia's letting you leave regardless of what Warlock says. Assuming he doesn't agree with her in the first place. He and I aren't exactly bosom friends, Zeze: we came a heartbeat away from drawing on each other last year."

"Were I still the Apprentice, your objection would have merit," Masego said. "That is no longer the case. Nothing short of my father's full wroth would stop me, and he will not go that far even for the Empress."

My fingers clenched. Then my flank got hit while I was still engaged.

"I'm not going," Vivienne flatly said. "You need me here, especially if you're going into the Everdark."

I shot her a glare.

"We'll continue that conversation in a moment," I told her.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Because you're going to lose your argument with Hierophant, and when you do you'll dig your heels in about this. You hate to lose, Catherine. We settle this now, when you're still reasonable."

"There's nothing to argue about, Thief," I said with forced calm. "It has to be you."

"I am a spymistress," Vivienne replied. "Not a ruler. Send Adjutant instead, it is clearly the appropriate response."

"No," Hakram quietly said, looming tall at my back. "It can't be me. Vivienne, think about this for a moment. Whoever is sent back will need the highest authority possible to settle affairs without trouble. You know what that means."

The dark-haired woman frowned.

"That's irrelevant," she said. "Hakram, I admit without qualms that in matters of rule you are my superior. I will not achieve half as much as you given the same mandate."

"It's not irrelevant," I darkly said. "It's unpleasant to talk about and it's unfair, but it's true anyway: If I appoint an orc regent of Callow in my absence, there will be riots. Maybe even rebellions."

Indrani didn't want anything to do with this mess, thank the Gods, and I wasn't giving Diabolist this close a look into the inner workings of the Woe so I'd sent her to keep Archer entertained. This would have been much, much worse if there'd been an audience.

"Hakram is broadly known to be your second in command," Vivienne said. "And respected by many. His authority would be observed even without the regency. Your court has been butchered, Catherine, it needs to be rebuilt before the chaos spreads any further. That is not my wheelhouse, it's *his*."

"You know whoever I send needs the fucking title, Thief," I hissed. "Stop being obtuse. I've been away from the kingdom for months, the person taking charge needs the legitimacy behind them or it'll start coming apart at the seams."

"Then appoint him Governor-General," Vivienne said. "It carries enough power that-"

"That would make the highest authorities in matters both civil and military greenskins," Hakram broke in calmly. "We are not dealing with a blank slate or arithmetic empty of emotion. I may be an organizer of some skill, but that is immaterial. The amount of resistance I would face would be much larger than yours. You argument is only correct if stripped of context."

"I can't handle all the balls you have up in the air, Catherine," Vivienne said, voice rising. "You need the entire kingdom's granaries reorganized, you need to get massive amounts of steel to arm all those soldiers the Hellhound is recruiting, you need someone to steady the treasury and rebuild the King's Council and – Gods, do I need to go on? I can't handle all of this, not while also running the Jacks. Hakram could. His entire Role is about taking care of loose ends."

The thing was, she had a point. I knew she'd been very careful not to use the reason she was being so aggressive about this, of course. She didn't want me around Diabolist without her keeping an eye on it. Not, I suspected, because

she thought I would suddenly forgive Akua Sahelian for her sins. She knew me better than that. But she saw Diabolist as a weed, and thought it was her duty to burn out any attempt to grow roots. I forced myself to set that aside, and address what she'd actually been saying. Which, unfortunately, wasn't untrue. I trusted Vivienne to run the Jacks and to undertake some other discreet matters, but it was a fact I'd never dropped so much responsibility in her lap before. She'd had the education of a minor noble as a child, even though her family no longer formally held title, but that would only take her so far. What she did remember, she would be out of practice at. *And we don't have forever*, I thought.

Procer would be occupied with the Dead King for the foreseeable future, but there was no guarantee part of the crusader host would not try Callowan borders again if it saw weakness. The Dominion still had two armies on the field, and the League's intentions were opaque to me. My instinct had been that the Tyrant of Helike and his madman of a Hierarch would be taking a swing at the Principate, but that'd been while it was still the dominant force on the board. With Keter on the march, the League might be feeling adventurous enough to aim for other territories. And that was without even considering Malicia, who sure as Hells wouldn't let me bind the wounds of Callow in peace. If Warlock was in Thalassina and cooking up something dangerous enough he wanted Masego to lend a hand, then the Ashurans were about to get a very nasty surprise. That left me the only direct threat at the Wasteland's gated: the Empress wasn't going to stop after a few assassinations. She was only getting started. *And the only person I trust to lead the Jacks in hampering her plans is Thief.*

Vivienne was leagues above Hakram, when it came to shadow games. My second was skilled at sifting through what our informants brought us and digging out the nuggets most important, but he didn't quite have the knack when it came to actually using the Jacks for more than spying. I needed someone to start a knife fight, and Adjutant wasn't the man for the job. But Vivienne wasn't the woman for the rest of it, was she? She wasn't wrong about that. If I forced too many duties upon her, she'd only end up failing at what she was actually good at. Which left me only one way through the mess. I knew what I needed to do was poor tactics, but it still needed to be done.

"You're right," I admitted, and there was a glint of triumph in Vivienne's eyes. "Hakram will go with you. For the sake of appearances you'll still be named Regent."

And there went the glint.

"No," they said, more or less at the same time.

I cast a look at Masego, who seemed mildly irritated our own chat was left unfinished but unwilling to press the matter. He would be. Knowing him, he was probably mentally organizing his arguments without listening to a word of what went on between the rest of us.

"Catherine, you can't go into the Everdark with so weak an escort," Hakram gravelled. "This is madness. The drow are infamously violent and treacherous."

I kept my face blank. He'd never... There was a first time for everything, I told myself. It didn't matter. I had an argument to win and getting emotional about it wasn't going to help.

"I'll have Archer and Diabolist," I said. "It's enough. I'm not going to war with them, I'm going to secure an alliance."

"And who will handle the diplomacy, then?" Vivienne harshly said. "Indrani? You? Or will you allow the butcher of Liesse to speak in Callow's name?"

"Better we dispense with the drow entirely than risk you going into their realm with so light a force," the orc said. "They would be a useful addition, but they are not crucial and results are uncertain. Not worth the dangers."

"It was one thing to put all our coin on the Army of Callow when we had the leash on the Dead King, however laughably feeble that leash was," I replied. "It's another when Malicia's the one who let him out, on unknown terms. There will be battles, Hakram, and there's only so many Callowans of fighting fit. Only so many we can *afford to lose*. We need someone to share the casulaties with, or it won't matter that we have good farmland: there won't be enough people left to till it. If you have another candidate for alliance, I'm all ears."

"You did not answer me," Vivienne said.

"Because what you said was pointless, Thief," I said. "I would prefer Diabolist to serve as an adviser, but if I need to let her do the talking then that's what going to happen. I know you don't like it. I don't either. But there's no point in letting her out of the box if we don't actually *use* her."

"There's a difference between using and trusting," Thief hissed.

"*Enough*," I said, voice rippling with power.

Not Speaking, no, I was not that far gone. I hoped I would never be. Vivienne flinched, and Hakram looked chastened for reasons beyond the obvious. He usually brought his objections to me in private, and I thought he might already be regretting this. He should have known it would sting he'd side openly with Thief in an argument, even if he disagreed with me.

"Callow was just crippled," I said. "You can both argue all you want, that is a godsdamned fact. And we all know the Empress is far from done. Now, the two of you can disagree with me heading into the Everdark with only Archer and a mass-murdering spectre for company, but at the end of the day I have to be the one to go and someone needs to fix the mess back home. Vivienne, you argued you couldn't do it alone. You're right. Hakram goes too."

"He could-" Thief began, but I raised my hand.

"No, he can't," I said. "I've heard your issues with this plan. I have answered them and made a decision. Unless you have something new to add, the only question left if whether or not you'll obey when I make this an order."

Hakram stirred uneasily.

"You're the one who gave me the speech about needing to assert authority," I told him. "I just have. I won't deny the risks. But you can't deny that Callow needs the two of you to get back on its feet, either."

The orc licked his chops.

"The drow are a gambit," he said. "Promise me you will treat them as one. Do not carry your anger over the failure in Keter into this, Catherine. We can survive without them. If the situation spins out of control. . . "

"Hakram," Vivienne cried out, sounding betrayed. "You know she won't listen if it's just me. Gods Above, stick the damned course."

"There is no perfect solution," the orc said, turning to her. "We take the risks we have to. It's not the choice I would have made, but I'm not the one making the choices. Neither are you."

"I won't bet it all on a long shot," I told Adjutant. "There's a limit to how long I'm willing to stay there as well. But I believe it's worth trying."

He nodded, though his discomfort was still plain on his face. I turned to Vivienne, who was worrying her lip.

"I could refuse to go, even if you make it an order," she said.

She could. The Woe were not sworn to me, save for Hakram, and his oath was not one between queen and subject. It was a deeply personal thing, and not one I would sully by equating with simple obedience. There were few things I still considered sacred, but what the two of us had said on that hill beneath moonlight was one of them. No, for all that I was Queen of Callow I would not call Thief my subject. She was, like most the Woe, my companion. When she deferred to me, it was out of trust and respect. Not because a sister from the House of Light had put a chunk of metal on my head and spoken a few dusty words. Forcing her hand here would shatter the fragile trust the two of us had built since we'd made our pact in Laure. I would have to convince her.

"You're making this about me," I said. "That is beneath us both."

"This is about your decision," Vivienne replied, frowning. "Not your character."

"My decision shouldn't matter to you," I told her. "The question you should be asking is this: is it better for Callow if I accompany Catherine or if I return?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"You are the queen of said kingdom, in case you forgot," she said.

"I'm a warlord who got oil smeared on her forehead," I replied bluntly. "I'm useful to the kingdom, it's true. There would be consequences if I died. If. I'm not exactly easy to kill these days, Vivienne. And while it's *possible* my heading into the Everdark without you will end up biting our home in the ass, it's a *certainty* that if you don't return some of our people will bleed for it. Hakram will have too many duties on his plate, as you pointed out. He won't be able to use the Jacks like you would."

"You can't leverage Callow against me, Catherine," Vivienne said, sounding resentful.

"You didn't join up because you liked the look of me," I said quietly. "There was a reason, and you were quite blunt about it. I'm not using a damned thing, Viv. I'm reminding you what we're actually about. It's easy to forget, in the thick of it. I know that well."

The expression on her face was an ugly one, but she did not contradict me. She spat to the side, after a moment.

"Fine," she said. "Damn you, but fine. I'll go. Don't make me regret it."

I let out a relieved breath. If that hadn't worked, I wouldn't have had anything else to trot out. Tired in a way that was nothing physical, I turned my eyes to Masego.

"You two can leave us," I said without turning.

"Catherine," Hakram tried.

"It's been a while," I mildly said, "since I've had to repeat myself so often."

His fangs clicked together, but he didn't say anything more. Hierophant had been sitting silent this whole time, growing increasingly impatient.

"Quite finished?" he said.

"Yes," I replied without a hint of apology.

I gathered myself together for another verbal brawl.

"I spent most of your squabbling mustering arguments," Masego admitted frankly. "I have several, some grounded in fact others in my personal opinion. It took me some time before I realized it was unnecessary to do so. I do not need your permission to go."

"You need my gate, if you want to get there before the year's over," I replied.

"If necessary I will summon and bind a fae of sufficient rank to serve as a gate-maker," he said without hesitation. "Though I would be disappointed by the pettiness of your choice."

I grimaced. He'd be right to be. It was easy to simply think of the Woe as my companions, my closest friends, and leave it at that. The truth was a little more complex. The ties binding them to me were different for all, and though that'd never brought conflict until now I could admit that'd been mostly luck on my part. It'd been going to happen sooner or later. Masego and Indrani were not invested in my fight the way the other two were. For the latter it was an entertaining enough diversion, and she liked me enough to carouse away the 'boring' parts, but for all that Archer was arguably the least tightly bound to me she also had few other calls on her time. She wanted to travel, one day, but she was in no hurry. Masego had first joined the Fifteenth because he believed it would allow him to witness sights nothing else would, and in this we had delivered. He truly liked us, I was sure of that. Even Vivienne, who'd come late to the band. But his first and paramount love would always be sorcery. After that came family, and though some days I suspected we were half-that in his eyes his fathers had been entrenched in that position for much longer.

If Warlock sent for him, as the man had, Masego would go. Because even after that sting of that betrayal revealed by the echoes of the fall of Keter, he loved the man deeply. I'd almost considered not passing along the message,

truth be told. He might not have heard it when I spoke with Juniper, as he'd not been so close. But that would be a betrayal, what was left of my principles had whispered. But he would learn eventually, and it would cost you, a colder part of me had noted.

"I won't withhold a gate no matter your choice," I sighed. "I didn't mean that, and I apologize for implying it."

"Apology accepted," he said, nodding politely. "Though the choice has already been made. This a formality I will entertain until you have made your peace with that."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"For future reference," I said. "When you're humouring people to avoid hurting their feelings, it's best to avoid telling them that."

The dark-skinned man frowned.

"That's rather backwards," he noted. "Would their feelings not be more likely to be hurt if they believed at the start they had a real chance of success?"

"That's – you know what, we can finish that conversation at another time," I sighed. "Masego, I know you have reasons to want to go."

"I do not care in the slightest for the fate of Thalassina," Hierophant said. "Some ritual components of use come from the city, but none irreplaceable. It is my understanding that the Ashurans are your enemy as well, however, so out of politeness I will kill as many as I can before taking my leave."

"And that's appreciated, believe me," I said. "But I need you with me, not on the other side of the continent. If half of what I've heard about the drow is true, your presence would make talks go a lot more smoothly."

Having a mage capable of flattening a mountain in attendance tended to make people a great deal more civil.

"You are quite skilled at terrifying people into obedience," Masego said, and he sounded like he believed it was a compliment. "My presence seems like it would be helpful, but necessary is overstating the case."

"The grand total of what I know about the drow is four pages from Surley's first volume of *Realms of Calernia*," I told him. "I'd be going in blind, without you."

"There is little I have read on the subject that Diabolist has not," he said. "And much of the reverse that is true."

This wasn't going to work. I needed a different angle.

"You won't be safe in Praes," I said. "I'm essentially at war with the Empress and you're my most dangerous sorcerous asset."

"Malicia cannot lay a hand on me without incurring my father's enmity," Masego said. "Which I do not believe she wishes to happen, as he would kill her brutally."

"She could still-"

"Catherine," Masego said gently. "I know you would prefer I remain at your side. I am not displeased by this. Yet there is nothing down your current path

that matters more to me than getting answers from my fathers. We are not debating. I am awaiting your final silence."

And there it was. I wondered if this should feel like a betrayal, because it didn't. Hakram siding with Vivienne had, and it was still a pebble in my metaphorical boot to remember it, but this... It would be like getting angry at a fish for swimming. Masego would always do what he wanted. It was the way he'd been raised: essentially untouchable in a nest of scheming and murder, people bending over backwards to curry his favour or accommodate him. In a way, he was no less highborn than Diabolist. He'd had all the privileges of the old blood with none of the duties, and still the heart of him was pure Wasteland. His desires would always come first, and it was unthinkable to him that they would not. I passed a tired hand through my hair.

Chapter 50

Partings

> "There is no poison more potent than hatred made silent."
>
> Arlesite saying

I twisted my boot sharply, feeling fingers breaking under the steel. The fae cried out in pain, though I was less than impressed by how whiny she was being: I got broken fingers all the time, I could tell when someone was being overly dramatic about it.

"So Larat tells me you go by Lughlyn, these days," I conversationally said. "And that you were the Lady of Bright Meadows once. That's Summer, isn't it?"

The thing that was once the Prince of Nightfall was looking at us with a lazy smile, sitting on an overturned stone. The rest of the Wild Hunt was watching us with varying degrees of interest, and more than a few vicious smirks. Just because hey rode together didn't mean they were particularly affectionate.

"It was indeed of Summer, Sovereign," one of the fae called out. "As proud a knight of the Court as there ever was."

Good, they were getting involved. Public torture and humiliation had a way of drawing them in, admittedly, even when it was one of theirs doing the screaming. I'd had more than taking a firm stance with a discipline case in mind when I'd begun this, so their attention was more than welcome. I dug my heel into her palm and there was another sickening snap followed by a hoarse scream.

"So, would anyone care to tell me why Lughlyn is currently on the ground?" I said, opening the proceedings to the gallery.

I glanced at the dark-skinned fae wriggling on the stony shore. She'd come to my attention more than once, of late. First by picking a fight with Vivienne when she'd been on corpse-scavenging duty, and more recently when she'd decided to open her mouth after being given orders.

"She protested her sworn duties," another fae called out.

"That's right," I said, smiling thinly.

"I would *never*," Lughlyn gasped. "Sovereign, I was merely-"

"Are we now goatherds, to ferry your mortal cattle?" Larat quoted softly. "Ah, Lughlyn. So much pride, so little sense. It was always a guilty pleasure to flay that off of you one layer at a time."

The one-eyed prince of the fae might be first among equals of the Hunt, but he was no caring warden of their welfare. He delighted in pouring oil over the flames whenever he could, and today he'd been handed an opportunity to indulge his darker leanings.

"Now, our good friend is beneath my boot because she happened to be loudest hen in the henhouse," I casually continued. "So she's going to have a bad day, because of that. But we're long overdue another conversation, aren't we?"

Larat laughed, bright and merry and utterly unrepentant.

"Stand tall, Riders of the Hunt," he called out. "We must now be called to account for our many sins. Our queen is a demanding one."

"My fashionably treacherous lieutenant has it right," I said, grinding down on Lughlyn's hand for punctuation. "Any of you remember the Battle of the Camps?"

"We fought under your banner that day, and slew many," one of the fae said.

"So you did," I mused. "When I woke up. Until then you just... watched. As those in my service died."

Keeping the Hunt in line required a very careful mixture of violence and patience, with a sprinkle of unpredictability added to the brew at the last moment. I'd been lax in making them drink it, after the campaign up north began, and my men had ended up paying for that during the parts of the battle where I was dreaming of death. I'd added a little more violence than usual to make it more bitter a draught this time, as they very much deserved it.

"We were given no orders by your Hellhound," one of the fae said.

Ah, finally one whose name I knew.

"Because the lot of you remained out of sight, Seldred," I said. "Now, would any of you care to guess if I'm pleased by that?"

Heel. Lughlyn screamed.

"You would have us shepherd mortals," another fae said, her voice lilting with distaste.

"From now on, in my absence, you will answer to others," I said smilingly. "Thief, first, and if she is not there it will be to Marshal Juniper."

"No oaths bind us to mortal writ," Seldred said, fingers stroking his beard.

I took my boot off the dark-skinned fae's hand.

"Lughlyn, would you care to earn a modicum of mercy?" I said.

"By your will, Sovereign," she croaked out.

"Kill Seldred," I ordered.

The other fae's eyes widened. A heartbeat later and they were already going at each other like rabid hounds. Lughlyn was wounded, but she was also desperate and Seldred had been taken aback by the sudden turn. It evened out. Silver blades sounded against each other in furious fighting, until one of them slumped headless to the ground. Lughlyn stood panting and bloodied, a

long wound scarring her torso where the other fae's blade had gone through her mail. I strode up to her, feeling the eyes of every fae on me, and laid a hand on the laceration. Winter flowed through my veins and poured into her, the blood freezing with a snap and the wound slowly closing as my will was ordering to.

"Now, I don't consider this a case of me disciplining you," I told the Hunt. "The dead are dead, and you're useful enough I won't take your heads on a whim. This is a warning, my lovelies. About the dangers of toeing the line with me."

I patted Lughlyn's belly gently.

"You can be on my good side," I said, then jutted a thumb at Seldred's corpse. "Or you can join him. There is no middle ground, and I have no use for defective instruments."

"So spoke the Queen of the Hunt," Larat said, voice carrying without ever rising. "So we shall remember."

I inclined my head towards the one-eyed fae as the others echoes him softly.

"You have you orders," I told Larat.

"They will be obeyed," he promised with a sharp grin, "most carefully."

I cast a last look at the Hunt. A simple public execution would not have cowed them, not in the same way this had. Death they were no stranger to. But being made a spectacle of, so casually? Oh, that would cut pride as well as flesh and those kind of wounds were much more dangerous to fae. They were creatures that feared humiliation more than pain, in many ways.

"Don't look so pleased, One-Eye," I said. "I'm holding you responsible for whatever they get up to, when I'm not there to take a look."

If anything, that broadened his smile.

"You are taking delightfully well to cruelty, my queen," he said. "This lark has been even more entertaining than anticipated."

Well, that was the Larat for you: never more disconcerting than when he doled out praise. I kept my face calm.

"Open the gate," I said. "I have farewells to make."

He rose and bowed with feline grace. It was a short stroll from the beach to the Woe's camp, and I noted with approval that while I'd been sorting out the Hunt the three leaving had finished packing up all their affairs. Indrani was poking at the fire with a piece of driftwood, and shot me a wounded look when I joined them.

"Did you just have a fairy pit fight without me, Cat?" she said. "Because that would be *extremely* inconsiderate, and I expected better from you."

"I was just making a point," I dismissed, then threw her a bone. "I promise if I ever arrange some kind of sordid Arcadian death tournament you'll get an invitation."

The brown-skinned woman looked thoughtful.

"Maybe next year?" she mused. "I mean, they'll start being more trouble than use at some point and if you *have* to get rid of them. . . "

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," I muttered.

The others looked on in amusement, at least most of them. Much as I hated seeing them leave, there was no point in delaying any longer. I reached Hakram first, the tall orc towering over me in his burnt plate.

"Cat," he gravelled. "About yesterday-"

I shook my head.

"Water under the bridge," I said. "I already felt under siege, so I took deeper offence than I should have."

"No," Hakram said, shaking his head. "You were right to be displeased. We debate in private, when we differ. One front."

I clasped his forearm, in the legionary's salute, and after a moment he did the same.

"I won't part with you on bad terms," I told him gently. "Bad enough I won't see you for months. It'd done and buried, let's leave it at that."

He let out a sigh that sounded closer to a kettle's whistle.

"Done and buried," he echoed.

I squeezed his arm.

"I'm leaving you with the roughest work again," I said. "I'm sorry, Hakram. It always seems to end up that way."

He offered a flash of ivory fangs in response.

"At least this way I won't have to decipher that war crime you call cursive before passing instructions along," he teased. "Silver lining, Cat."

I chuckled, already missing him before he'd even left my sight.

"Don't slack on your training," I said. "You won't have Indrani and I to keep you sharp anymore."

"My bones are deeply grateful for it," he snorted, and pulled me into a hug.

My chin still didn't reach his shoulder, but I'd learned where to place my head over the years. The embrace loosened after too short a while. From the corner of my eye I caught Indrani tugging at Masego's robes and messing up his braids, fingers looking for every excuse to linger. Hakram's gaze joined mine, and he let out a thoughtful rumble.

"I didn't think that would last," I admitted quietly.

"She gets bored easily," the orc agreed. "But she was stubborn even before she started rubbing elbows with Callowans."

"Have you. . . " I said, trailing off.

Talked with either of them about it, I left unspoken.

"Last time I tried she defenestrated me and called it awareness training," he muttered. "That one's all yours, Cat."

Well, it'd been a while since I'd last strolled across a field full of buried munitions. I was due another fool's errand.

"Fair travels, Hakram of the Howling Wolves," I said.

"May victory slight your foes, Catherine Foundling," he replied softly.

We broke away, and Vivienne filled the gap within moments. Her face was hard to read, but her heartbeat was steady. If she was angry still, it was an anger mastered.

"Vivienne," I said, hesitant. "I know you're not happy about this."

For a long moment, she stayed silent.

"I know the end of that story," she finally said, discretely glancing at Akua. "You gave an oath. I worry of the journey there, but I'll make my peace with the path knowing the destination is certain."

"It's going to get better, you know," I said. "Sooner or later we'll reach daylight."

She smiled ruefully.

"Will we?" she said. "It doesn't matter. I can be angry with Catherine Foundling but see the sense in what the Queen of Callow has said. They are different people, in the end."

"I don't want to split with things unspoken," I insisted. "Leaving to fester-"

"Enough, Catherine," the dark-haired woman said. "You got your way. I've spoken my piece, and you heard what I did not speak. Keep it in mind, before threading fingers with the Folly's own architect. Necessity is a fickle mistress, and we've learned the dangers of swift gains that sow far losses."

I bit down on my answer. This was as good as it was going to get, and opening the wound again would only make it worse. It left a bitter taste in the mouth, but what part of ruling didn't?

"Be careful," I told her instead. "And be wary."

"I always am," Vivienne Dartwick smiled. "Try not to slip up in the Everdark, would you? Fighting fire with fire tends to end up burn everything down."

"You know me," I lightly said. "A diplomat without peer, I am."

"Well phrased," she noted, amusement bleeding through. "Until next time, Cat."

I nodded back. Indrani had finally let Masego go free, so I caught him by the arm as Thief and Archer fell into the ritual of insults and petty slights that was their way of saying goodbye.

"Zeze," I said.

"Catherine," he said, sounding bemused. "Please don't touch the braids."

My fingers twitched. It was an almost physical need to screw with them now that he'd told me not to.

"As a sign of my deep and abiding love for you," I said. "This once I won't."

"What a merciful queen you are," he drily said.

"That's what they say," I agreed without missing a beat. "I know I've already told you, but don't forget-"

"Trust no one in Praes," Masego said patiently. "Not even Father. We've had this conversation before."

"I guess we have," I sighed.

Asking him to stay one last time would change nothing and sour the farewell, so I forced down the urge.

"Be careful not to provoke anyone you are not capable of killing," he instructed me gently. "And if you can get your hands on any arcane tomes..."

"I'll see what I can do," I smiled.

"Good," he said, visibly pleased.

He sobered a heartbeat later.

"Take care of Indrani," he said. "I believe she might be upset."

She knows you're heading into the tiger's den, I thought. *And without any guarantees, this time, or one of us to watch your back.*

"I will," I said, searching his face for any sign that he might suspect...

Well, I wasn't sure what exactly. I wouldn't know until I got her drunk enough to talk. But it was a sharper with a lit fuse, and the lack of awareness I got from him was probably the only thing that'd kept it from blowing so far.

"I'll leave messages with the Observatory as soon as feasible," he promised. "Stay alive, Catherine. I would be cross if you failed in this."

"Well, you've always been a soft touch," I smiled.

When I pulled him close he stayed stiff for only a moment before gingerly putting his hands on my shoulders. Gods, he was so horribly awkward at times. That thought should not be as fond as it was. We withdrew and I left him to pick up his bags, joining the other two where they awaited. All three of them headed towards the Hunt, already mounted, and I met Larat's eyes before he opened the gate. He inclined his head. We had an understanding, he and I, about the kind of ugly things I would do if any of them were hurt on his watch. Indrani sidled up to me and we watched them pass into Arcadia, standing there in silence until the gate closed and the last wisp of power was gone.

"So," Archer said. "What now?"

"We set out tomorrow," I said. "Tonight, though? I distinctly remember you saying something about a drink called Atalantian baptismal you stole a bottle of."

Indrani grinned.

"Now there's exemplary leadership at work," she said.

Duty could wait until tomorrow, for once.

—

I dropped the bowl in the pile of dishes we'd have to wash in the lake later, having scraped off the last of the stew. I tossed the spoon after it.

"I didn't think you'd be this good a cook," I admitted.

Indrani snorted, sprawled against a stone she'd covered with blankets.

"You're such a city girl," she said. "You think I had people to cook for me, back in Refuge? Ranger passed along camp recipes, but she wasn't the one who tended the pots. There was a pecking order."

"I was under the impression it had grown into a respectable settlement," Akua said, sounding mildly surprised.

She was on the other side of the fire, scarlet eyes luminous in the darkness. Diabolist hadn't touched the stew herself: she was capable of touch, nowadays, but she required nothing to eat. Neither did I, but on occasion it was a pleasant distraction.

"Sure, by numbers," Indrani said, pouring herself a drink of the Dead King's finest rotgut. "But it's not a village, Sahelian. It's just a large camp that exists

because the Lady killed the beasts that used to live there. We get traders, now and then, and the dwarves peddle things but it's everyone for themselves."

"Yeah, she didn't strike me as the ruling kind of woman," I muttered. "Not a lot of patience there."

"Good thing, too," Indrani said, handing me a cup. "Otherwise who'd cook, you? You're shit with a pot and everyone knows Callowan food is disgusting."

"I've seen you tear into apple bread like it murdered your parents," I drily replied.

"Well, desserts are fine," she conceded. "But your beer is basically dirt water and there's not a single inn in the kingdom that can do mutton right."

"It's true," Akua noted. "Callowans are infamous for being ignorant of spices and drowning their plates in that horrible Laurean sauce."

"I'm not taking culinary trash talk from a drunken vagrant and a woman whose people think poison is actual seasoning," I replied defensively.

"That fucking sauce is basically poison too, let's be honest," Indrani muttered.

Best avoid getting too deep into that fight, I decided. Both of them were much better travelled than me, so they had depth of argument I couldn't match. Not that there was anything wrong with solden sauce, unless you were some kind of fancy noble. Thankfully, it was easy to distract half of my opposition: I raised my cup and with a cheer Indrani met my toast. The baptismal went down like a cup of goblinfire, and that was coming from someone who could barely get drunk anymore. Indrani had to be burning out some of the effects with her Name, *no one* had that good of a liver.

"Oh, that's the good stuff," Indrani rasped out. "You sure you don't want a cup, Ghost of Bad Decisions?"

"It would not affect me," Akua replied, unruffled by the latest mildly insulting nickname she'd been given. "Truth be told, even before my… current state of affairs, I rarely drank. Enough to prove I'd obtained the correct antidote, but it was never my sin of choice."

"Ugh, nothing worse than a villain that won't drink," Indrani complained. "I thought Praesi were all about living it up. I bet you were all chaste and demure, too."

"Hardly," the shade replied, sounding amused. "I had my own affairs, though given my station they required a degree of discretion."

Indrani topped up my cup and I the way I felt light-headed had nothing to do with the drink. Not yet, anyway. Gods, did she intend to gossip with *Akua Sahelian*? This was surreal even by my standards, and I'd turned into fucking mist this week.

"Come on," she goaded. "Don't hold out on us now, Murder Bitch. We're just getting to the juicy stuff."

"I actually spent the night with Fasili, not long before the battle at Liesse," Akua shrugged.

"Fasili Mirembe?" I said, brow rising. "Hells, you have terrible taste."

"He was not unskilled, if that is your worry," the shade smirked.

Ugh. He'd had a permanent sneer on his face. Not bad looking, since he'd been highborn and the Wasteland did breed for looks, but the notion of him naked was enough to have me wince. Also, now that I thought of it...

"We killed him, didn't we?" I frowned.

"Robber shot him in the back," Indrani agreed. "He still has the skull. We used it when re-enacting Valerian Betrayed, just before the Battle of the Camps heated up. Sappers make a terrible chorus, for the record. Can't reach a proper low note for the life of them."

Well, if Robber's bunch were badly running plays then at least they weren't running illegal scorpion fights. Probably. I hoped.

"Woe to the defeated, as always," Akua said, tone sardonic.

She didn't seem all that broken up about it, but then this *was* Diabolist. The only person I'd ever seen her care a whit about was her father, and we'd shot him too. I drank from my cup, and watched as Indrani began working on her fourth. We'd reach drunk waters soon enough, by my reckoning. That stuff hit damnably fast.

"Akua, begin the watch," I said, flicking a glance at her.

Indrani laughed.

"She can stay," she said. "I know what you want to rake me over coals about. Surprised it took you this long, to be honest. Besides, Collar Fairy's part of the crew now isn't she?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "We have an understanding."

"A slightly longer leash, as long as I behave and prove of use," Akua said, rather matter-of-fact. "Not an unusual arrangement, by my people's standards."

"You sure?" I pressed Archer.

She waved my objection away carelessly.

"Please, Cat," she said. "Her whole thing is reading people. You think she hasn't figured it out if *you* picked up on it?"

I sighed. She wasn't wrong about that, I'd concede.

"Your affections for Lord Masego," the shade calmly said. "I did not believe the matter to be a secretive one, I must admit."

"Hey," Indrani said mulishly. "Let's not get all... formal about this. It's just a thing. That is there."

"It's not a crime," I said. "To have, uh, feelings."

"I can't believe the killer ghost is handling this better than you are," she said, sounding amused.

"I don't really get it," I admitted. "But I don't have to. I just don't want you to get hurt trying to get something I'm not sure can be had."

"I know he's not interested in bedplay, Cat," Indrani snorted. "Come on. Last time he saw me shirtless he asked if I needed healing."

I winced. Yeah, that sounded like him all right. Part of it was that had had a hard time reading cues, but I was pretty sure that when he got close enough

to people he started just dismissing the possibility of the cue being there at all. He'd been raised in Praes, so he could at least pretend to be better at social things than he was with strangers, but in closed company he tended to drop the pretence and outright admit when he wasn't sure about something. Which was heart warming, in a way, because it meant he trusted us. It also meant he could get a little rough around the edges since he didn't bother to hold back.

"He has no interest in men either, if it is any comfort," Akua said. "I tried to place such agents in his bed after he joined the Fifteenth, to no avail."

I was not surprised in the slightest that she'd tried to honeypot the Woe, to be honest. I was lucky that back then it'd been Masego and Hakram she could go after, and neither was really the seducible type. Well, Hakram was apparently *really* easy to seduce, but not to get to stick around afterwards. Juniper kept calling him a word in Kharsum I was pretty sure meant 'easy' in a highly unflattering way after she had a few drinks.

"Huh," Indrani mused. "I mean, I assumed, but that's nice to know."

"So you're not unaware that it's not his wheelhouse," I delicately said. "And still?"

"Never really met anyone like him before," she admitted. "Dangerous but without the edges. It's soothing. And he's earnest, Cat. How many people do you know are willing to just be like that? I just. . . "

Really like him, I completed for her. Yeah, I'd been there once or twice. Usually to my disappointment when I got to know the person in question better, but she'd gone about this the other way around. I put an arm around her, tugged her a little closer. She immediately leaned in and bit my neck, because even while venting she remained a wild animal, and I had to slap her belly several times to get her to stop. She laughed quietly after withdrawing.

"I'm not in love, you tart, so don't get all worried about this," Indrani said. "It won't be trouble. I don't even think he's noticed."

At least a little, he has, I thought. He wouldn't have asked me to take care of her if he hadn't.

"Of course, I'm not the only one who's lusting stupidly," she mused.

"Let's not go there," I said, frowning.

"Come on," Indrani grinned. "I have a running bet with Hakram about how many times a day you'll give Vivi the eye."

Hakram, that gossipy bitch. If I found out there was a betting pool, there would be *dire* consequences.

"It's just been a while," I said. "Don't read into it."

Indrani leaned back against her stone.

"Right, you've had an empty bed since you called it quits with your redhead," she said. "We'll find you something back in Callow, don't worry about it. Or maybe some drow will fit the bill. Winter Leftovers, what do drow look like?"

"Grey-skinned," Akua said. "Humanoid. Usually of thin frame, even the women, though there is much larger appearance variance between genders than for ogres or elves."

"I honestly couldn't tell whether or not the Spellblade was a man or a woman," I admitted, eager to latch on to the change of subject.

"There is no relation between drow and elves, mind you," the shade noted. "I've read the former take the sobriquet of 'dark elves' quite badly, given that of the two they are the race truly native to Calernia."

Indrani was warm against my side, and pleasant now that she'd stopped biting like a rabid badger. We'd just scratched the surface with our little talk, I was well aware of that. I wasn't the only one who'd been keeping an empty bed for the last year, and it was a much larger change for her than I. But now was not the time to press, so I allowed the chatter about the people I would seek out to wash over me. I was still uncertain of how we'd find the drow in the first place, much less plumb the depths of the Everdark, a niggling worry in the back of my head. We only had so much time to spare. As it happened, it was an empty worry.

It was them who found us.

Bonus Chapter: Fatalism II

> "What is it if not sorcery, that I can tax a single belltower in Salia and set half a dozen cities ablaze?"
>
> First Princess Anaïs of Cantal, referring to the incident that began the First Liturgical War. Later became the Proceran shorthand of 'Salian belltower', referring to a small act carrying disastrous consequences.

As a girl Cordelia had made a deep study of ruling, knowing that she would day inherit Rhenia and intending to serve her people as best she could. Her few journeys south had made her feel the limits of Lycaonese wisdom acutely, and so she had sought answer beyond the traditions of her people: not to simply discard the lessons of her forbears, but to pair them with the learning of other realms. She had looked far, in acquiring tomes. There was little literature of worth out of Callow, save for Jehan the Wise's sharply-tongued memoirs, but the the Free Cities and the Thalassocracy had borne greater fruit. The Ashurans had led a remarkably stable state for centuries in the face of episodic warfare with Nicae and its allies, and their admittedly dry records were worth the reading if one could stomach the tediousness of the minutia. The islanders, however, had few lessons to offer beyond those touching on the establishment and maintenance of a strong bureaucracy. In matters of ruling philosophy, they either parroted the faraway Baalite Hegemony's onw sages or lapsed into the mysticism particular to their national cult. The League, on the other hand, was a treasure trove of learning and scholarship.

Of contradictions also, though that was only to be expected of such a fractious people. The *asekretis* of Delos had bled rivers of ink on the subject of the ideal state, attempting myriad reforms as opposing factions of the ruling Secretariat came to power, and from both failures and success there had been much to learn. Cordelia had modelled the examinations now necessary to enter civil service in Salia on those required to rise higher in the Secretariat, and found them more than adequate a method to root out the highborn parasites who'd infested the city and replace with previously unknown talents. From faraway Penthes, ever bickering with its two closest neighbours and stirring uneasy in the Empire's shadow, she had learned the value of leveraging gold and treaties

where force of arms would fail. By the most famous Tyrants of Helike, Theodosius and his always ambitious brood, Cordelia was taught the art of sowing dissent and fear to humble greater opponents.

She considered herself to have first crossed a line when she'd obtained Praesi works, all of which were illegal to possess within the Principate.

Yet there had been wisdom in those as well. Not in the rants and rambles of the most colourful foolsto climb the Tower, but in the likes of the first Dread Emperor Terribilis and Dread Empress Maleficent the Second. It would only be years later, after she was crowned Prince of Rhenia, that her reach grew long enough to acquire more recent Praesi works. Dread Empress Malicia's treatise 'The Death of the Age of Wonders' had cost her a fortune and over sixty dead to acquire a mere incomplete transcription, and what she'd found had been a chilling read. It'd been a lucid, strategic look at the historical failures of the Dread Empire followed by laying out foreign policy that would prevent such disasters from happening again. The suggested rapprochement with Ashur had been the greatest danger among those put to ink, and the cause of many a sleepless night after Cordelia became First Prince. To her dismay, the Prince of Rhenia had found that much the Empress deemed the path to a better Praes was eerily similar to what she herself intended for the Lycaonese principalities. Strengthened internal trade, central oversight of crucial resources, the establishment of common institutions that would make old regional conflicts irrelevant.

The Evil now dwelling in the Tower was unlike any the Principate had faced before, she'd then understood. She had learned what she could from the enemy, and kept those lessons close. Even in those days she'd known there would be a reckoning with the East.

When she'd grown old enough to undertake the diplomatic missions her mother had always disdained and largely allowed to lapse under her reign, Cordelia had immersed herself in the teachings of broader Procer. There was an old and proud contempt for southern squabbling, among her people, and Lycaonese as a rule paid little heed to the ways of the Alamans and the Arlesites. What did the debates of the Highest Assembly matter to them, they argued, when no matter the ruler no soldiers ever marched north to help hold the passes against the dead and the rats? There was truth in that, but also bitterness that blinded. Beyond the complex tapestry of marriage alliances and shifting interests, Cordelia had found the the heart of Procer's art of rule had been birthed by two books. The first, and oldest, was the work of Sister Salienta of the House of Light. Once royalty in Salamans, after taking her vows she had spent years penning her life's work, the *Faith of Crowns*. One hundred and three pages over which the former princess had attempted to lay out the duties and responsibilities of one ruling over others as a child of the Heavens. It was beautiful prose, in truth, and thought at times it was more liturgy than practical it had very much been intended as manual for blessed rule.

Salienta had been the first to argue that the Right of Iron, the ancient prerogative by which the princes of Procer could war as they wished, was no simple

allowance: that regardless of permission, only a just war should ever be waged. She'd spoken of the right of those who toiled over land to own it, of the unholy greed behind taxes serving to enrich instead of serve. It'd been highly contentious at the time, but after open endorsement by the House of Light it had grown wildly popular and the book had since grown to permeate political discourse in Procer. Cordelia herself had drawn on the *Faith of Crowns* when declaring the Tenth Crusade, qualifying it as a just war according to the third definition laid out by Salienta. Still, as much as the writings had resonated with her it was what had come from them she'd studied closest. How, in essence, the royalty of Procer had found ways to follow its instructions to the letter while violating their spirit. The manufacture of 'just cause' to enable wars of expansion, allowing common folk to own the land yet to keep it only for a fee, the complex array of moral pretexts to justify often gouging taxes.

Salienta's work had always been closely linked with the power of the House of Light, and so in a way it was no surprise that its first written rebuttal was offered after the last of the Liturgical Wars came to a close. None had ever claimed authorship of the small work simply titled *On Rule*, yet it was an open secret in Procer that its father was Prince Bastien of Arans, the same man who later became the very first of his homeland to be elected First Prince of Procer. Where the *Faith of Crowns* had been a religious and moral guide to dominion, *On Rule* was a dispassionate study of the acquisition and preservation of power. To this day, it was considered impious to a copy of the book, for within it Prince Bastien baldly observed that the House of Light was an earthly force like any other, with interests and obligations, and should be treated no differently. The book pragmatically advised that guile and treachery were functional tools, if sparsely used, and that it was usually better to be a victor of ill-repute than a saintly cadaver. Going even further, it argued that moral law was a matter different from a ruler's interests and on occasion even opposed to them. There were few princes and princess in Procer who would admit to having such a volume.

Cordelia had never met any royalty south of Neustria who did not.

Therein lay the dichotomy at the heart of the Principate, she'd thought, and she was hardly the first. *To have Salienta's tongue and Bastien's hand*, the saying went. Spoken like an insult, an implicit accusation of hypocrisy, yet it was observed more scrupulously than many laws among Alamans and Arlesites. And herself as well, she was honest enough to admit. There was beauty in the *Faith of Crowns*, but it was no shield for the vicious intrigues that thrived in the Highest Assembly. As the years passed, however, the blue-eyed prince had come to look at the treatises differently. Less as exercises of philosophy and more as inheritances from different eras of Procer. One where the House of Light had been entwined with the ruling class of the realm, another where it had stood rival and opponent. Since the year *On Rule* had been written, the nature of the pillars holding up the Principate had shifted. Though in many ways the victors of the Liturgical Wars, the priests had been estranged from

the halls of power just as the once-powerful mages had been. They had kept their wealth, their ancient rights, but their foes had not forgotten the dangers of allowing the House too much influence and so slowly uprooted it from the tallest peaks of Proceran authority. Cordelia had scrupulously observed this habit, save in one matter.

That mistake, she thought, was now coming home to roost.

"Someone organized this," the First Prince of Procer spoke with deliberate calm. "Of that there can be no doubt. The last recorded conclave involving the full priesthoods of the west dates to Triumphant's conquest, gentlemen. This is not *happenstance*."

Three men shared her solar, this morning, none of them younger than fifty. All were Alamans whose tenure as the heads of the informal triumvirate of largest Proceran spy networks preceded her second crowning. Her eyes lingered on Louis de Sartrons, a skeleton of a man with rapacious features and a bald head. As far as the Principate's records were concerned, he was a middling official in the lower ranks of Salia's diplomatic service. In truth man was the highest patron of the Circle of Thorns, an ancient cabal of Salian officials whose charge was to run the foreign spies of Procer. The Circle had a long tradition of abstaining from politics, providing unflinching service no matter who sat the highest throne of Procer: at the height of the Great War, before it had been clear Cordelia would triumph, the man across from her had provided regular briefings to all major contenders without playing favourites. The blonde did not particularly like him, but she could respect his dedication and sharp competence. The depths of his failure in this particular instance was made deeper disappointment for it.

"We were blindsided," the old man admitted in a rasp. "I've had my people in the Thalassocracy and the Dominion scrambling for answers, but as far as we can tell there is no Ashuran committee behind it and we all know the Majilis has not held session in months. Or even informal council, for that matter. It could be the Seljun, Your Highness, but his position remains weak. He should not have the pull or coin to arrange something so far-reaching."

The Seljun of Levant carried a dozen fantastical titles, though the only one that truly mattered to Levantines themselves was the last: First of the Pilgrim's Blood. Direct descent from the most revered of the Dominion's ancient founders made the ruling line of Levant effectively sacrosanct to its people, but that respect did not historically extend to lords and ladies obeying a Seljun's instructions beyond half-hearted lip service, if even that. The current figurehead ruler of the Dominion, the Most Holy Wazim Isbili, was impotent even by the standards of his predecessors. He was an unlikely culprit in this, Cordelia was inclined to agree. If there was a foreign agent at work, she suspected it would be a committee buried somewhere in the convoluted maze the Ashurans called a government. Still, the failure now at her door was not the Circle of Thorns' alone. Cordelia's gaze shifted to Balthazar Serigny, a hirsute bear of a man with a thick black beard and eyebrows almost defiantly large. Balthazar

the Bastard, as his subordinates often called him without a speck of fondness, was former fantassin of common birth who'd ruthlessly risen to the top of the Silver Letters by blackmailing and discrediting his every rival.

He'd thrived there, unsurprisingly, as the Silver Letters were a vicious band of thieves and murderers who'd been skilled enough at the work that over a century ago they became the left hand of the rulers of Procer. The Cordelia's most recent predecessors had used them to keep an eye on the unrulier princes and occasionally sow internal dissent when a faction in the Highest Assembly grew dangerous, though she herself employed them as knives only to remove Eyes of the Empire. Of this shadowy triumvirate, it was Serigny she had the worst relation with. Unlike the Circle, the Silver Letters had taken sides during the Great War and several times tried to assassinate members of her inner circle on Constance of Aisne's behalf. She'd given serious thought to having him hanged after taking the throne, but it would have antagonized the web of informants she now needed the most to remain in power. Instead she'd made it clear he was on a very thin leash, and that he would immediately begin training the successor she had chosen for him.

"It's not us, First Prince," Balthazar the Bastard grunted, unmoved by the unspoken reproach. "I've shaken every tree in the Highest Assembly and nothing fell out. The Lanterns almost caused a diplomatic accident when they passed through Orense, so they weren't expected in the slightest. Been keeping an eye on our own temple rats ever since, but they're closing ranks. Not a peep out of the priests. They've got a hand in this, sure as day."

"There hasn't been a word out of the House because your pack of thugs was caught out, you blundering fool," Simon de Gorgeault hissed. "Do you know how many pointed questions I've had to answer?"

The man was in his seventies, closely-cropped silver hair topping an angular face that had been a poor fit when he'd still been named Simone but a reputably popular one after the oversight was corrected. He was a lay brother of the House of Light, and unlike the other two men the organization he oversaw was only one foot in the shadows. The Holy Society was more informal channel to the leadership of the House of Light than true web of spies, an association of nobleborn lay brothers and sisters who facilitated dialogue with the throne and occasionally passed along whispers the priests did not prove willing to surrender on their own. He was diplomat as much as he was a spymaster, and Cordelia had sometimes wondered where the man's loyalty truly lay. He'd been in her service for only a few years, while his friendships in the House were decades old.

"I have some questions of my own, Brother Simon," the First Prince said. "It is somewhat offensive that before arranging a conclave the House would not reach out to me."

The silver-haired man grimaced.

"I've told them as much myself," he said. "Yet it appears they consider this to be a religious matter, not a political one, and so consider the throne's

involvement to be unnecessary."

"Which begs the question of what exactly that *matter* is, Simon," Louis de Satrons' reedy voice mused. "It's customary for a conclave to be proclaimed openly and the subject of debate announced beforehand."

The leader of the Holy Society sucked at a loose tooth, as if hesitant.

"I am told this is to be a closed session," Brother Simon said. "By the request of a Chosen."

Cordelia stilled. One of the heroes? The Chosen had no formal authority over any priesthood, save for those come of it, yet it would be a lie to say they had no influence. And yet none of the Chosen had caused ripples, when they had first gathered in Procer at the eve of the crusade's first assaults.

"Which one?" the First Prince coldly asked.

"I was refused that knowledge," the silver-haired man admitted. "And warned any meddling by the throne would be severely censured by all participants."

The House of Light could be handled, Cordelia thought, and the Speakers were more mystics than political force, but the Lanterns? The Levantine priesthood considered strife to be a holy duty. If prodded too harshly, they would bare blades without hesitation. That would be utter disaster, the kind of diplomatic incident that could begin a breakdown of the Grand Alliance if it was not carefully handled.

"We will set that offered slight aside for now," she said. "What is the to be the subject of the closed session?"

"Heresy," Brother Simon said. "As pertaining to Callow."

Cordelia did not close her eyes or sigh. She was better-mannered than that, and showing weakness in front of these men would bring no good. The temptation remained there, however, even as her mind raced. A lesser conclave in Salia had already declared Catherine Foundling to be an abomination in the eyes of the Heavens for perverting the sacred act of resurrection for the purposes of Below. This was not a minor thing, yet it carried no true legal consequences and was essentially empty censure unless the declaration was also adopted by the House of Light in Callow. Which it had not been.

Unlike its Proceran cousin, the priesthood of Callow was no monolith of shared practices and beliefs. Distant regions of the kingdom stubbornly denied the leadership of the influential cohort of priests in Laure, who had seen said influence sharply decline with the end of House Fairfax. In the latter years of the imperial occupation, the priesthood of the southern half of Callow had effectively become a separate entity from the rest. The Doom of Liesse had shattered that state of affairs, however, leaving behind disparate packs of clergy preaching stances on the Black Queen that were just as disparate. The centre had largely fallen behind her reign, and parts of the east as well – Marchford heart and soul, as she remained wildly popular there, Summerholm more reluctantly and she was mostly spoken of there as a preferable alternative to Praes. The rest was lukewarm of opinion, though many priests in the south had involved themselves with Hakram Deadhand's care of the refugee tent cities.

Proceran priesthood often spoke of its eastern counterpart as a backwards cousin, considering its refusal to bestow titles to its own greater than Brother or Sister as archaic and its insistence to rely only on the Book of All Things as scripture as rather misguided. Callowan priests were ever quick to remind their western cousins that their practiced dated back to the founding of the kingdom, when the Principate had been nothing but a mess of warring tribes, and did not shy from sharp reminders that faith could only be tainted by involvement in earthly matters. Still, save for the occasional minor squabble the relationship between the priesthoods had been largely cordial over the last two centuries. It helped, Cordelia, had often thought, that Callowans priests were often more interested in arguing with each other than foreigners. Off-hand, she could think of only one thing that would make them band together.

Foreign meddling.

"Dread Empress Malicia is Arch-heretic of the East," the First Prince carefully said. "Only one person can carry such censure at a time."

"She is *presumptive* Arch-heretic, as the woman who holds the Tower," Brother Simon corrected. "In the absence of a formal declaration, the matter is not writ in stone. And even if it was, the decision of a Proceran lesser conclave would be overturned by a true conclave's own proclamation."

The man was not a fool. He'd immediately understood the first measure she would turn to in order to prevent the blunder: rustling up enough Proceran priests to declare the Empress the current Arch-heretic, preventing the same title from being granted to the Black Queen.

"Atalante is a renowned stronghold of faith in the Gods Above," Cordelia said. "Could such a debate be delayed until representatives from its priesthood arrive?"

They would have to travel by land, the Lycaonese thought, likely through Tenerife. The ruling princess of that principality was a close and trusted ally, who could be counted on to arrange gentle delays. If the First Prince was able to slow down the proceedings, the conclave could still be persuaded to turn aside from this mistake.

"That matter was already settled by secret ballot," Brother Simon said ruefully. "As the Hierarch of the League is of Bellerophon, a city long in the service of Below, it was determined that the priests of Atalante should be considered lapsing in the faith. The same holds for Delos and Nicae, much less Penthes – which all known to be suborned by the Empire."

No word was spoken of the Titanomachy, yet Cordelia knew better than to try that particular avenue. Levant had ancestral ties to the Gigantes, while the giants still slew every Proceran to approach their lands. Any approach there by a First Prince would carry *great* dangers.

"Then the House of Light in Callow should be sent for," Cordelia said, struggling to sound calm. "To justify its anointing of the warlord Catherine Foundling."

"That cannot be," the silver-haired man said quietly. "For I am told the priesthood of Callow is to stand judgement as well, for that very blasphemy."

Her worst fears in this, confirmed.

"Brother Simon, this is a *grave* blunder," the First Prince quietly said. "There are better ways to return Callow to the embrace of the Heavens. This will be seen as an attack, a spiteful blow in the wake of defeats on the field."

The man stiffened like an angry cat.

"We speak of holy conclave, Your Most Serene Highness," he woodenly replied. "Servants of the Heavens do not concern themselves with the sentiments of mundane powers, only that their acts are just in the eyes of Above."

What is this, if not an act of mundane purpose? Cordelia thought. She could not treat with the Black Queen, if she was condemned a heretic by every signatory of the Grand Alliance. Worse, there would be no treating with *Callow*. The pattern of history there would cut too close to home. After the Fourth Crusade, when a young Principate had turned on Callow after being unceremoniously thrown out of the Wasteland by Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second, there had been attempts to crown one the the slain king's children as a puppet to ease occupation until the pretence could be safely discarded. Juliana Fairfax had instead cut her own throat at her own coronation, immediately after declaring her rebelling cousin as heir. King Henry Fairfax the Landless had promptly been declared to be Damned by a lesser conclave in Salia, a plot that was deeply reviled in Callow to this day. The recipe here was different, yet too many ingredients were the same: a young ruler who'd fought Praes with distinction, heavy defeat followed by a Salian proclamation of heresy and the perceived collusion of priesthood with an invading force. That the Lanterns and the Speakers joined their voiced to the conclave would change little, she thought. How many Callowans had ever seen an Ashuran or Levantine? The kingdom had been closed, under Praes, and now the only living memory of either people was as a Proceran ally. Even those who despised the Black Queen's reign would have to bow to popular sentiment and fall in line, lest they be accused of collusion with the Principate. And worse yet...

Woe, Cordelia. Woe to the north and to the south.

"I must urgently address the conclave, Brother Simon," the First Prince said.

The old man frowned.

"That would be difficult to arrange," he said.

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "It matters not to me how many favours you must call upon, how many bridges must be burned and quiet threats made. This is no longer a question of diplomacy. It is now a question of survival."

Brother Simon's face smoothed out, though not before she read scepticism in the cast of it.

"I understand that the Callowan question of of import to the throne," he slowly said.

He paused to choose his words carefully, and as as backhanded reminder of who answered to the other Cordelia smoothly placed answer to a reply unfin-

ished.

"There is more to this than the affairs of Callow," the First Prince said. "See it done, Brother Simon. By evening tomorrow. Or choose the abbey to which you will retire, after designating a successor less prone to dithering."

She would not allow the Kingdom of Callow to be driven into the arms of Below. She could not.

Not after Agnes had told her the Dead King would be on the march by winter solstice.

Chapter 51

First Impressions

> "All serve, by whip or by writ."
>
> Inscription carved above the entrance to Stygia's Magisterium

The game made no sense, and I definitely wasn't saying that just because I was losing. I fanned my face with my cards, trading hard stares with Indrani and Akua. Sadly, though the former was already drunk she was also drunk enough she misremembered her cards half the time. That made trying to read her an exercise in pointlessness. I'd already lost two laundry chores to her because she'd been under the impression that a set of four cards in the same suit was actually a bad hand. My eyes narrowed as I studied her stupidly grinning face. Unless that was what she wanted me to think. Was she faking being drunker than she was?

"Your values will not grow from staring at Archer," Diabolist mildly said.

I scoffed at her. The wily ass had just tricked me out of two firewood chores after letting Indrani raise the bid through the roof when she had the most horrible hand we'd seen all night. I was beginning to suspect I was being had by the both of them complicitly.

"This is a stupid game," I said. "No wonder it's from the Wasteland."

"Oooh, she's got no trumps then," Indrani drawled. "She only gets that ornery when she knows she's going to lose the round."

I raised my chin haughtily, above the petty squabbles of the lesser folk around me. I would win or lose as a dignified Queen of Callow. Probably lose, I admitted to myself, since I had two Knaves but no same-suit card to match them, making them worth a pittance of ten points even paired. The Three of Cups stared back back at my face mockingly, promising I would be washing the dishes of these traitorous wenches until the end of days.

"No draw," I said, eager to get my beating over with instead of worsening the costs. "Settle."

"Shit," Indrani said, and slapped her five cards down onto the stone.

Two from the suit of Swords, but only a four and six, and no matches which meant I'd so far managed to pull a surprise upset. Diabolist gracefully added her own to the pile. The Knaves of Cups and Coins, with... shit, equivalent values for the rest. This was going to get ugly. I hastily slapped down my own hand then withdrew by half an inch.

"Succession," I said, and tried to slap my fingers back on the pile of cards before anyone else could.

Akua's fingers almost slid under mine in time, but at the last moment she stopped and a wondrous wonderland of no longer having to traipse around this fucking godforsaken countryside for dead wood presented itself to my eyes. Then Indrani's knife went through my hand, technically touching the cards first and winning succession. There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Archer," I said patiently. "Is there a knife through my hand?"

She mused over that, then met my eyes.

"No," she told me. "'tis but an illusion."

Naturally, I decked her in the face. Not full strength, but hard enough she went flying with a deeply satisfying yelp. Sighing, I drew the knife out of my hand and allowed Winter to knit the flesh back together. Holding it by the tip I pointed it accusingly at Diabolist.

"You could have said something," I complained.

"I debated saying 'watch out, she has a knife'," Akua acknowledged. "But really, that could apply to any of us."

I kind of missed the days when the shade of my hated enemy had stuck to creepy intimate endearments instead of outright sassing me. Horrifying as the thought was, the Woe might have been a bad influence on Diabolist.

"That's going to bruise, you know," Archer called out.

"Be grateful I didn't aim for the spire, you wanton savage," I yelled back.

We'd crossed the Chalice, that quiet lake to the northeast of Keter, and yesterday arrived near what could be considered the outskirts of the Everdark. The tall snow-capped peaks shared their name with the realm of the drow, though in truth their kind occupied only parts of it and all of those underground. This was one of the few parts of Calernia where digging too deep wouldn't unleash a sea of angry dwarves, though drow could hardly be considered a better outcome. There were not gates into the Everdark anymore, Indrani had told me. Millennia ago there had been, massive always-open panes of bronze that led into a hollowed out mountain at the heart of drow holdings, but those were long abandoned and Ranger had allegedly found the inside of the mountain collapsed when she'd tried her luck there. We'd have to try our hand with the Warrens instead. A pretty name, that, for what was a much less glorious reality: the Warrens were no great structure, only a sprawling mess of dank tunnels leading underground. Many were collapsed or leading to dead ends, and there were no surface markers indicating their presence. The only people who knew their locations for sure were the drow who still used them, sending roving bands of raiders and slavers to the surface.

Those enterprising souls were not known for having a lot of success in those depredations. Ages ago, before the Golden Bloom had been seized by the elves, the now-broken kingdom of the Deoraithe had occasionally been troubled by them. Now, though? The surface paths led them into three dead ends: the Kingdom of the Dead, the Golden Bloom and the Chain of Hunger. None of these were known to be welcoming locales to outsiders. Once every few decades it was said a cunning and careful warband managed to slip through dwarven tunnels or other secret paths to reach northern Procer – or much more rarely, northern Callow – but even fewer of those who made it there succeeding at returning home. What little was known of the Everdark these days was learned through exiles, which were rare and tended to settle in Mercantis exclusively. Diabolist had hired a few of them as mercenaries, when she'd gone on her mass-murdering spree, and told me since she'd been rather unimpressed by the quality of their soldiery. Regardless, this was now the second day we were on the hunt for any path into the Warrens and we had nothing to show for it. Indrani had been told of a way down by Lady Ranger, and we'd begun there yesterday, but unsurprisingly it'd been brought down.

It was also marked with blood-red runes, that from what Akua could piece together were a warning about 'the Destroyer' having hunted there. Ranger had evidently proved as charming as one would expect. Dusting herself off, Indrani rose to her feet and shook away the bits of stone stuck everywhere in her clothes. She strolled back to the fire easily, maintaining the pretence nothing had happened with an admirable amount of conceit. She plopped herself back down and stretched like a lazing cat.

"Next round, then," she said. "I believe I won the succession, so Cat didn't get shit. Hand me my knife, would you?"

I eyed her sceptically.

"Do you promise not to stab me again?" I said.

"And I as well," Akua smoothly tacked on.

We both ignored her.

"I mean," Indrani hedged. "Define stab."

"Archer," I firmly said.

"It's not like it doesn't grow back," she quibbled. "Also, I know you got all pissy last time, but you know I'm right about the mystery stew. Technically, since anything we cut would grow back, if we used it-"

"We're not going to cut off my fingers and put them into the stew so you don't have to hunt rabbits anymore, Archer," I hissed. "It's not happening."

"Ironic," Akua mused, "that cannibalism only became matter of debate *after* the Adjutant departed."

"A good queen would be willing to bleed for her people," Indrani solemnly said. "I'm disappointed in you, Catherine."

"I know you're doing this just to rile me up," I said, eyes narrowing. "You know what? Fine. I bet you wouldn't even do it. If I cut off my thumb *right now*, 'Drani, you going to eat it?"

There was a beat of silence.

"Two firewood chores she doesn't," Diabolist announced.

Those were mine. That utter wretch.

"I'm a little full right now," Archer said.

I let out a mocking humph.

"So let's go with a little finger instead," she finished.

I spun her knife around, catching it by the hilt.

"You wouldn't," I said.

"Hey, use your own," she protested. "I don't want to get fae stuff all over it."

"You *just* stabbed me, you ass," I yelled.

"I mean, you can't prove that," Indrani mused. "Akua's more or less dead, so in Callow she can't be a witness in a trial. It's your word against mine."

"I'm going to break your knife," I told her bluntly.

"Don't, it has great sentimental value," she objected. "I think I killed a guy for it."

"To clarify," Diabolist said. "Did you kill him because you wanted the knife, or did you kill him and *then* want the knife?"

Indrani stroked her chin thoughtfully.

"Yes," she replied.

I laid a delicate finger on the tip of the blade, still holding the hilt, and made eye contact with my rebellious minion.

"I will send you back to Laure in chunks," Indrani seriously promised.

"At least they won't be used in stew," I replied just as seriously.

I caught her wrist when she tried to wrestle me down, but she half-leapt at me and we went tumbling into the rocks. I dropped the knife to free my hand, but she slammed her arse into my belly before I could push down her shoulder. I flipped us around, and tumbling towards a slope we went. In between having a faceful of Indrani's clothes in my face, I glimpsed Akua discreetly pawing through the deck of cards. I repressed a sigh. She was stacking it, wasn't she? A hard bump against the ground jostled me out of my despair, and I wiggled so Indrani wouldn't manage to tie my wrists together with her scarf. She was a fair hand at brawling, but then so was I did have the advantage of being able to lift her with a single hand if I needed to. I tugged at her leg and elbowed her in the stomach, climbing on top and forcing her into a bed of pebbles. Rustle, rustle. No footsteps, but grass parting under feet.

"Oh, I get it," Indrani smirked. "Give me a moment."

She tugged down the neckline of her shirt and thrust out her admittedly shapely tits.

"I'm ready," Indrani announced theatrically. "Ravish me, Black Queen. I am powerless before your might."

"Archer, now is-" I began.

"I get it," she winked. "Hey, Shady Business! Go for a walk or something. My legendary charms have finally overwhelmed her."

"That's not what I meant," I said, almost as irritated by the pun as the interruption.

Her brow rose, a salacious grin splitting her face.

"Good news, Fae Maiden," she announced. "You're back in the game. Lose the top first, I've been pretty curious."

"We're about to have company," I spoke in Kharsum, offering Indrani a flirtatious smile to keep up the pretence for watching eyes.

"*Yeah* we are," Indrani said, wiggling her eyebrows, but the moment I loosened my grip she began reaching for one of the sundry knives always on her.

They were creeping through the stones now. The slope to the left, leading to a narrow ledge skirting the flank of a rock spire. There'd been a stretchof sparse grass beneath it, I remembered. *Not much green, though. They have to be more than a few if they made that much noise going sneaking through.* I inhaled, yet there was no fear in the wind. I could almost discern heartbeats, but they were too muted to tell apart. Sorcery, or some natural trait? I got up, turning my back to where they were approaching from, and offered a hand to Archer.

"We doing this or what?" she grinned.

"Go easy on me," I said. "My back's still aching."

The sound of a cord being pulled taut was the opening salvo of the dance. I tore away from Archer, blade already half-formed in my hand, and sped forward without missing a beat. I did not need to speak orders to the others. Both Akua and Indrani had been in enough scrapes, either at my side or not, to need no instructions when blades came out. My first drow sighting was little more than a glimpse of silvery eyes set in an angular grey face flanked by strips of obsidian: a heartbeat later the enemy had vanished, pressing itself against the dead angle of the slope. An arrow went flying from above, arced perfectly towards Akua's silhouette by the fire, but when it went through her chest all that happened was the shattering of ice. She was long gone.

"Archer, handle above," I called out. "I want prisoners."

"Spoilsport," she yelled back, landing in a roll that scattered her beddings as she grabbed her longbow.

I'd keep the ones down here busy, trying to limit the damage. I could hear faint heartbeats down the slope, just out of my sight, and they had quickened. They were waiting for me, to spring attacks in that moment where my eyes would be seeking them out and they would have me right in their sights. If I'd still been the Squire, that might have scored them a wound. Now, though? With a flick of the wrist I formed four monoliths of ice in the air above where they should be lying in wait and allowed them to drop. There were murmured sentences in a language I did not know, but it seemed they had no parry. The working flushed them out, seven of them scrambling away from the falling ice. Warriors, one and all, or at least drow in good shape wearing armour. The sight if it was strange to me, after fighting the soldiery of the west. No steel there, no plate or mail: small strips of obsidian fell down to their knees in a thick layer,

kept together by barely visible strips of leather. My eyes were sharp enough to find the discreet runes carved onto the pieces, though I knew not their meaning or purpose. There were few differences among them. None looked terribly older than the others – were they human, I would have believed none older than their late twenties – and I could hardly even tell them apart. The helms, though, had some slight variations. All of them were thin incomplete circles of obsidian closely keeping to the frame of their faces, keeping hair out and going all the way down to the beginning of angular chins. From that dark glass, caps of leather descended towards the back of their necks, set with small round stones, save for one drow. The lower part of that one's cap had a line of long dark feathers tickling down to its back.

Well, the one with the fancy hat tended to be the one in charge. It would do.

While I'd been sifting through the sight of them, they'd recovered from the surprise. Before the ice even hit the ground one of them tossed an iron-tipped javelin at me, though from the corner of my eye I caught another danger. The archer had come out and fired another arrow. I could hear Archer pulling at her own bow, though, so I instead I focused my attention on the javelin. It was well-thrown, aimed right at the centre of my chest. It was also laughably slow to my senses after the kind of fights I'd picked of late. I snatched it out of the air by the shaft and pivoted, throwing it back at the same drow twice as fast. To my surprise, it did not duck. Instead its entire body flickered, shadows swallowing it whole, and it fell into a pool of darkness that stretched and slithered across the stony ground only to reform a dozen feet to the side into the same person. Well, that was a new trick.

"Surrender," I called out.

I realized just after that I'd forgotten about the arrow, musing it wouldn't exactly set the right tone if the moment after demanding surrender I got shot. As it happened, Archer pulled through.

"Trick shot," she crowed.

Her own arrow tore through the fletching of the one the drow had fired, sending it spinning away from me, and it continued at a sharp angle upwards. The sound of obsidian shattering and a pained grunt followed. The one with the fancy hat spoke something in drow tongue, and they all scattered into the shadows. Literally. Lines of darkness spread out, too many for me to follow them all. They had not, unfortunately for them, accounted for Diabolist. The scent of blooming ice filled the air as she formed a construct right to the side of a fleeing drow, fingers of frost ripping the warrior out of the shadowy tendril by the throat. To my approval, she'd gone for Fancy Hat.

"We have your leader," I called out. "Drop your weapons or she'll snap his neck."

Fancy Hat tried to flicker away again, but I wasn't having any of that. I flicked my wrist and a band of shadow tightened around its throat, keeping him in Akua's tender embrace as the flicker… failed, for lack of a better word. A javelin punched through the warrior's chest a heartbeat later, tearing at Di-

abolist's construct behind it. Right, drow. Infamously not the most loyal of companions. If that'd been the only one that could speak Lower Miezan, I was going to be *pissed*.

"All right, the hard way it is," I grunted.

The kickback from my running start shattered the ground beneath it, and a heartbeat later I was in the midst of them. One pooled into shadows, but an arrow nailed it and it flickered back into drow form with a leg pierced through, hissing in pain. I handled the rest as gently as I could. Spikes of shadow nailed one to the ground, another was sent to think about what he'd done in a bubble of ice and I shaped my sword into a spear for the third, throwing it straight through its foot when it tried to flicker away. There'd been eight in whole, and with one dead and two clipped by Archer that left... two. One was legging it back towards the grass. I let it run – might learn the way into the Warrens from it, assuming that was how they'd all come to the surface. The last stared at me with wide eyes and dropped its curved obsidian blade, slowly kneeling and putting its hands behind its neck.

"Diabolist, containment," I ordered.

An exertion of will had wings coming out of my back and I rose up, following behind the runner. It saw me, and flickered. Clicking my tongue disapprovingly against the roof of my mouth, I went down into a dive. No more running, then. Too much a risk of losing it if it stuck to that form. I wasn't even halfway caught up when the drow emerged from the dark tendril, grey skin gone pale, and began to run away on foot. *So it's exhausting to remain like that*, I thought. I wasn't surprised. There was no such thing as power without a cost. I swooped down like a hawk, boots landing on its shoulders, and it folded without a fight. A bit too much, actually. Its head hit a stone at a bad angle, and with a sharp breath I knelt by its side to check if it was still alive. My fingers went to the jugular, but there was no heartbeat to found there. Drow were only so similar to humans, then. I formed a flat piece of ice and put it before its mouth, tension leaving my shoulders when the surface fogged. Its forehead was bleeding and its eyes closed, but it wasn't dead yet. I swung the body over my shoulder and walked back to the skirmish field, finding the others had gathered the drow together in my absence. Most were bleeding, though we'd avoided outright lethal wounds. Even a lesser one could kill if you bled long enough, though, so the offer of wounds tended might be leverage we could use. I dropped the unconscious drow to the side of the others.

"All accounted for," Diabolist said.

I nodded. Archer rested her elbow on my shoulder, eyeing our prisoners with a deeply unimpressed look on her face.

"Was that trick really all they had?" she said. "I'm feeling a little shafted, not gonna lie."

"You can't use the kind of opponents we've had recently as measuring stick," I said. "We've been scrapping with some of the scariest people on the continent."

"They could have brought a mage, at least," she complained.

"Night's young," I replied, shrugging her elbow off me. "There could be others."

None of the drow were speaking, or even meeting my eyes. They remained kneeling and looking down, what little I could see of their faces resigned. *They think we're going to kill or enslave them*, I realized.

"Do any of you understand this language?" I asked in Lower Miezan.

No answer.

"Do you speak Mtethwa?" I tried in the eponymous tongue.

"Why would *anyone* want to speak that if they didn't have to?" Indrani mused.

I glanced at Diabolist.

"You wouldn't happen to. . . "

"Speak Crepuscular?" she finished. "I do not. For much the same reason I do not speak cockroach."

"I'm disappointed in your tutors, Akua," I informed her.

"Indeed," Diabolist drily replied. "How dare they fail to teach me a language spoken only by a race that has not been seen in the Empire for centuries, whose influence in the broader continent is so insignificant some scholars do not mention them in the latest histories at all."

"Yes," I agreed without missing a beat. "It was very inconsiderate of all of you."

"Hey, disappointments," Indrani called out in passable Chantant. "Do any of you understand me enough to be shamed by my scorn?"

Three of them stiffened. I grinned, and not pleasantly.

"Would you look at that," I murmured in the same language. "It's finally paid off. All of you who understand me, get up. We're going to have a nice, civilized chat."

Indrani choked on her tongue at that, which did not reassure them in the slightest.

Chapter 52

Finesse

> "No, see, you'll profit as well. All you need is to convince five others of contributing coin and when they do you'll get a part of their own contribution. It'll all work out, I promise."
>
> Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful, convincing High Lords to invest in the construction of ritual pyramid outside Ater

Even after having done arguably worse things, I'd never warmed to torture. I'd once had an interesting conversation with Black about it, where he'd been somewhat equivocal but overall inclined to agree with me. Torture, he'd noted, tended to be unreliable. Some people folded the moment you pulled out their fingernails, sure, but those with a little more staying power would need a great deal of violence before they started talking. And at that point, how could you tell whether they were saying something because they thought you wanted to hear it or because it was actually true? Some heroes side-stepped the whole issue by having truth-telling abilities, but that was bullshit divine intervention – you couldn't reproduce those results with spells, not with any degree of reliability. I tended to get by on my increased senses, since fae eyes and fae ears were much harder to trick than their human equivalent, as I now suspected the Lone Swordsman once had. William hadn't gotten a pat on the back from Above and glaring lights appearing whenever someone fibbed at him, he'd had to rely on Name senses to read the opposition. He'd been quite good at it, in retrospective.

I'd had to mutilate my own soul to get better at that trick than he was, so for once good ol' Willy had me beat from the grave.

I stared down at the drow kneeling in front me, frowning. There'd been three who'd stiffened when Indrani had spoken in Chantant, and we'd separated those from the rest of the prisoners immediately. I'd then shaped Winter into a thick spire of ice hollow on the inside and ordered the first prisoner brought in. Akua was at my side, as she likely had more experience at this kind of thing than any of us. Indrani had been curious but I wanted someone keep-

ing an eye on the rest of the drow. A flick of the wrist shaped a rough bench of frost and I sat down, eyes never leaving the still-silent prisoner. Diabolist had stripped it of its helmet, revealing bone-white hair cut so short I could almost see the skin beneath. I would have preferred the obsidian armour off as well, but there were no obvious clasps to it: I suspected it was like a mail shirt, put on with another person's help.

"We know you understand us," I said.

The drow did not react. Denial? Possibly. Or resignation.

"Akua, raise its head," I ordered.

Diabolist knelt by the prisoner's side, forcing the chin upwards so the drow would have to meet my eyes. It resisted, but only half-heartedly. The eyes were not as silvery as I'd thought. The sclera was white as a human's would be, though noticeably larger, but it was the iris that caught my attention. It was not entirely silver: there were strands of the colour to be found, more visible than the rest, but the base was a dull brown. Some sort of sorcerous blowback? The black pupil at the centre was uncomfortably shaped, more oval than circle, and I'd yet to see a single drow blink. In a way, it was more troubling to look at their kind than a fae – the fairies were inhuman, with only the barest varnish of similarity, but the drow was close enough to human that the discomfort was felt more steeply.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Silence. There was fear in the air now. I drummed my fingers against my leg, then sighed.

"**Answer me**," I Spoke.

The prisoner's face twitched into a pained rictus. It was fighting the command, proving to have stronger will than most. It was not enough.

"No one," it hissed, voice dim. "Nothing."

Diabolist rose to her feet and the drow stubbornly went back to looking down.

"Blind it," Akua suggested evenly. "Rip out the eyes and toss it back out bleeding in sight of the others."

"There's no need for that," I said.

This one looked unwilling to provide useful answers even when its arm was being twisted, so we'd try the others before seeing if it was necessary to resume the proceedings a little more sharply. Diabolist wasn't wrong that a dollop of fear would be useful, but she was also proving that even as a shade she had that horrid Wasteland disregard for people. I would not resort to knives without exhausting every other possibility first. I'd gotten an idea of the drow's voice, from that unwilling reply, enough for glamour. Illusions did not come naturally to me, as even now they required more focus than I was typically able to spare when in a fight, but I had the time to weave it properly tonight. A small sphere of shining light formed over my open palm and the drow breathed in sharply when a decent approximation of its voice began screaming hoarsely into the night. I kept the glamour going for thirty heartbeats, then ended it

with a harsh snap. Akua's scarlet eyes followed me as I dismissed the sphere and spun glamour again, resting a hand atop the drow's head: a heartbeat later half its face appeared brutally scorched to the naked eye, nose cut off and one eye left a bloody empty socket.

"Sleep," I ordered, and forced a sliver of Winter into its shaken mind.

It dropped without a sound.

"Drag it outside," I ordered Diabolist. "In sight of the others. Then get me another."

"By your will," the shade said, and smoothly bowed.

I flicked my wrist and shaped one last glamour. An eye, this one, though since I'd never actually seen a drow eye out of an eye socket I had to improvise to an extent. Akua came back quicker than I'd expected, the fresh prisoner moving gracefully into the room. I was *pretty* sure I recognized this one. It'd been the one who actually surrendered when things went to shit for their warband. Still, it wouldn't do to leave the point half-made. I popped the glamoured eye into my mouth and chewed, smiling pleasantly at the new arrival. Its lips thinned, darkening to a deeper bloodless grey.

"That will not be necessary," the drow said in perfect Chantant.

I swallowed. So did the prisoner.

"Well, this is promising," I mused. "Diabolist, make our friend a seat."

Ice bloomed and a block spun into existence. It was, I noted, with mild amusement, closer to the ground than my own seat. Praesi, huh. The drow's silvery eyes lingered on the sorcery before it took a seat. The silver strands were much deeper, in this one. I could see almost nothing of the original green. They were also... less vivid than those of the previous prisoner. Interesting.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Ivah," it replied. "Of no sigil."

"I'm Catherine Foundling," I said. "Lately Queen of Callow, though I've picked up a few other titles over the years."

"I greet you humbly, Lately Queen," Ivah said.

I resisted the urge to close my eyes. I was going to let that one go, for the sake of avoiding the awkwardness of a correction this early into the talk.

"Just to make sure I'm addressing you properly," I said. "Would you happen to be a boy drow or a girl drow?"

Ivah blinked, silver fluttering behind long lashes. Not because it needed to, I suspected. It was a conscious expression of surprise.

"I am no longer Mighty," it replied.

"That, uh, was not the question," I said.

"If you were human," Diabolist said. "Which gender would you consider yourself to be?"

Ivah looked a little uncomfortable.

"Cattle has no gender," it said, sounding apologetic.

"As a Callowan, I can tell you that's frankly terrible way to approach animal husbandry," I noted. "But let's keep moving. You were... Mighty, is that right?"

"When still named Dimas, I was third under Zapohar and a rylleh in my own right," Ivah said. "What stands beyond you was toppled and disgraced, harvested of all but a sip of Night and sent to die in the Burning Lands as final mockery."

My eyes narrowed. I lacked context for most of that, but there was one part I had guesses about. I tapped the side of my eye.

"The silver," I said. "Yours is dulled. It's this Night that caused it in the first place?"

"That is so," Ivah sadly agreed.

"Your people are said to pay obeisance to the Tenets of Night," Diabolist said, standing at my back. "The matter is linked, I take it."

"All is one," Ivah gravely said, touching its lips with two fingers. "All is strife. The worthy will rise."

"I don't like the sound of that," I told Akua in Kharsum. "It's one thing for them to have some sort of cult paying dues to Below, but that silver in its eyes is no illusion."

"The drow mercenaries I hired were not capable of the shadow flicker," Akua noted in the same. "Perhaps the power ebbs away from the Everdark?"

"That lot outside is bottom-feeders, Diabolist," I murmured. "And still they were capable of a trick most Named wouldn't sneer at. There's something wrong here. If their lower ranks are this strong there's no way they'd be a ruin of an empire as they supposedly are."

"Unless," Akua said calmly, "that very power is the cause of ruin."

My brow rose. That was possible, yes. Were they all fighting of this Night so ferociously they'd broken their own realm?

"Ivah," I said. "The other drow outside, were they also Mighty once?"

The prisoner smiled thinly.

"None of us are drow, Lately Queen," it said. "Had we returned in glory, perhaps once more, but this is disgrace heaped upon disgrace."

So that was just going to keep happening, huh. Lovely.

"I thought Mighty was a gender," I said.

"Mighty *are*," Ivah stiffly said. "We are not, no longer. Most of them never were. They fought under no sigils, nor knew the favour of cabals. Meat for harvest."

"Mighty are people," Akua suggested in Kharsum. "And so those not Mighty, by definition, are not. Natural nobility, it would seem. Power earned or lost blade in hand."

"It's madness, Akua," I grunted. "If the only way people can ever amount to anything in a society is by killing, that's all they'll ever. . . "

I trailed off. Well. Yeah, I supposed that *would* collapse an empire. There would be a need to dig deeper into that nightmare of a culture later, but first there were immediate matters to be addressed.

"Do you know a way into the Warrens?" I asked the prisoner.

"The path we took was also meant for our return," Ivah warily said. "The marks on our feathers allow for passage through the Gloom, twice."

"Your feathers," I repeated carefully, then leant forward to flick a finger on one of the strips of obsidian making up its armour. "Those?"

"It is so," the drow agreed.

"What is the Gloom?" Akua probed.

"The gate into the realm of the Mighty," Ivah said. "Only those marked may leave, or enter."

"Indrani told us that when Ranger tried to get into the Everdark she got stuck in the tunnels," I told Akua in Kharsum. "Some kind of warded labyrinth, sounds like."

"We've enough at hand to salvage keys for ourselves," Diabolist said. "Though I would suggest we keep one guide to learn how to use it."

"I'm not going to just execute prisoners, Akua," I peevishly said.

"Those unable to speak Chantant are useless to us," she pointed out.

"It's not a question of usefulness," I said. "*We don't execute prisoners*."

"Dearest, I understand that mercy is a useful tool," she assured me. "I do not dismiss it. Yet for it to have worth in the eyes of the enemy, there need be a cultural value assigned to it. There is no indication it is so with the drow."

"This isn't about the drow, Akua," I said. "It's about us not putting holes in people who've surrendered. I've got no issue with killing on the field, and I've made my peace with assassinations when there's no other way to avoid making a mess. This is different. They're no real threat to us."

"They are blades we must then keep an eye on," Diabolist said. "Perhaps you and I are proof to such slights, but Archer is not. Nothing we have seen leads me to believe they will honour their surrender the moment the threat of death is lifted."

"If they break that understanding, after being made aware it exists, then they can be killed," I patiently told her. "That's how keeping prisoners of war works, Akua."

"The warband sought to slay or enslave us, and gave no warning before striking," the shade reminded me. "They have not earned such treatment. This is an unnecessary risk."

"It'd be easier to kill everyone, Diabolist," I said steadily. "It always is. But when you behave like that, you end up living in the fucking Wasteland. Is this the simplest way to do things? No. But it's how we do it, because if we don't act civilized then people don't act civilized with us."

Scarlet eyes flicked to the prisoner facing me. Ivah's eyes were watching us carefully, unable to understand the words but not beyond following the tones.

"Will they?" she wondered. "Act civilized, even if we offer them such civility."

"It was always one of your worst habits," I coldly said, "to burn bridges without ever trying to cross them. It may not work. We'll never know unless we *try*."

Diabolist languidly shrugged.

"I offer only perspective," she said. "The decision was always yours."

"It's been made," I flatly said.

I turned away from the shade, and cleared my throat.

"Ivah," I said. "I want you to guide us through the Warrens."

The drow's face fell.

"The passage leads to the holdings of the Kodrog," it said carefully. "The Mighty of that sigil are said to be among the strongest of the outer rings."

"Stronger than the sigil you used to fight under?" I asked.

"The Zapohar once ruled a whole district of Great Parun," Ivah proudly said. "Our Mighty claimed seats on no less than five cabals. The Kodrog would have been broken in an hour's passing, facing our wroth."

It grimaced.

"Their wroth, now," the prisoner corrected sadly.

"Parun was one of the great cities of the drow, before their empire broke apart," Akua told me in Kharsum. "Though not the capital, which I recall to be named Tvarigu."

"I'd guess the more powerful tribes – sigils, I suppose – live in the old cities," I replied. "Not sure what the cabals are, though. Some sort of alliance? Their Mighty seem to be able to belong to both at the same time."

"Warrior lodges, perhaps," the shade mused. "Or an association of influential aristocrats. It is hardly unprecedented."

I'd ask our songbird later.

"We can handle the Kodrog," I told Ivah. "I'd rather avoid a fight if I can, but if I can't I assure you they're not going to stop us. We're looking to speak to, uh, your most powerful sigils. The people that make the real decisions for the Everdark."

"You speak of the entire realm of the Mighty," Ivah said questioningly.

I nodded.

"There is no such thing, Lately Queen," Ivah told me. "No cabal has ever claimed to influence more than two cities, and the Hour of Twilight was massacred by its rivals a century past."

"All right, let me put it another way," I said. "Is there anyone at all that if they speak, everyone in the Everdark will listen?"

"*Sve* of Night," the drow said in a hushed whisper, touching its lips again.

"The Priestess of Night," Akua said, chancing a guess at the unfamiliar Crepuscular term.

"That is cattle-term," Ivah reproachfully said. "The Sve is Mighty."

Ah. That shed light, in a manner of speaking. So a Mighty was not male or female or anything else, they were *just* Mighty. Priestess was a female term, in Chantant, so the implication would be insulting to the drow. I'd keep that in mind for future reference. No need to give insult to the people I'd come to bargain with.

"And if the Sve gives an order, the Mighty will obey?" I pressed.

"The Sve has already given order," Ivah. "It is the truth of us, embraced."

"If the Sve says the drow are going to war," I patiently tried. "Would people listen?"

Ivah's face creased, folds in the skin appearing that no human could mimic.

"It may be so," the prisoner said. "The Sve does not speak, yet if the silence was broken all would hear of it."

"Then that's where we're headed," I said. "To have a chat with the Sve."

The drow shivered.

"Holy Tvarigu is forbidden," it told us. "Ancient and powerful sigils guard the paths to it."

"I can be convincing. I'm known as a diplomat of great skill, on the surface," I lied.

Akua was too self-controlled to snort, but the way she folded her arms together told me everything she thought about that mild reframing of that slight exaggeration.

"It would be better to be slain," Ivah softly said. "There are things worse than death."

Well, I hadn't expected the locals to be friendly from the start. Gods, when had anyone ever been?

"Tell you what," I said. "Get us into the realm of the Mighty, past the Gloom, and when we're there we'll change guides for the next stretch of the journey. You'll be free to go."

The drow's strange eyes narrowed.

"You would speak oath to this?" it asked.

"I would," I said. "And there are forces beyond your understanding that make me keep to those, when I care to give them."

Ivah hesitated.

"I would be slain, even free," it admitted. "I return bereft of Night, failing the terms of my exile."

Diabolist leaned forward.

"Tell me, Ivah," she said. "You spoke of the Night being harvested. From the living, as was done to you, but can this also be done to the dead?"

"That is so," the drow said.

"We have a corpse," she told me in Kharsum.

The one she'd held, who'd been killed by his own warriors. An easy enough concession.

"Do you need to have killed the person yourself to do the harvest?" I asked.

Ivah shook its head.

"Due can be bestowed," the drow said. "It is rare, yet not unknown."

"There was a warrior with feathers on their helmet," I said. "If you harvested them, would that fix your problem?"

"Tiarom was first in power among the warband," Ivah said, sounding rather eager. "There would be enough to no longer walk as meat, though it would leave me well short of Mighty."

"That sounds like a yes," I said.

I offered my hand.

"Ivah of no sigil," I said. "Should you take us past the Gloom and into the Everdark, I swear to return your freedom to you. We will part ways there without enmity or demand."

The drow looked at my hand curiously, then back at my eyes.

"You're supposed to clasp it," I informed it.

"Strange ways," the drow murmured, but without further fumbling we shook on it.

I rose to my feet, stretching out.

"All right, let's get this done," I said. "Akua, see to the rest of the warband."

"Healing is no power of Winter," she reminded me.

"You're telling me tending wounds wasn't something your tutors went over?" I replied, eyebrow raised.

"I will do what I can, if that is your wish," she conceded. "Though I promise no miracles."

"Never considered those to be in your wheelhouse," I drily replied. "Come, Ivah. I'm getting curious as to this harvest of yours."

The silver-eyed warrior followed without a word. Indrani was carving away at a peace of wood, when I came out, sitting on a stone and watching the others.

"Fruitful talks?" she called out.

"You might say that," I replied. "Wanna see something I assume will be highly gruesome?"

"Do I ever," she enthusiastically replied.

"Come with me, then," I said. "Where'd you leave the corpse?"

She blinked.

"Was I supposed to pick that up?" she asked.

"Where it died, then," I snorted.

It was a short stroll down the slope to where Fancy Hat – Tiarom, apparently – had found himself on the bad end of drow politics. The body was drenched with half-melted ice from Akua's construct, but otherwise untouched.

"Are we corpse-robbing?" Inrdani mused. "I thought we had, like, moral objections to that."

"I'm putting this under religious exemption," I told her. "Ivah, it's all yours."

"Many thanks, Lately Queen," the drow murmured, bowing.

It dragged the body further away from the wetness even as I felt Archer stiffen.

"Did they just-"

"Don't you say a fucking word," I hissed.

"Oh, that's making it into my next chat with Hakram for *sure*," Indrani crowed.

I valiantly ignored her, instead putting the full weight of my attention on Ivah and its 'harvest'. Kneeling at the dead body's side, the drow closed the

corpse's eyes before leaning over. I could barely make out whispers in Crepuscular, low and rhythmic. Then the dead drow… shivered. Liquid tendrils of darkness ripped out of the body, leaving bloody holes behind, and they slithered up Ivah's arm beneath the armour. The living drow exhaled. *You are what you take*, a woman's voice whispered in my ear, in no tongue I knew.

Ivah's eyes shone deep silver before dimming again, and I learned that this magical adventure was going to be a little more complicated than I'd like.

Chapter 53

Gloom

> "I am ever amused to hear men speak of senseless violence. What is violence, if not the failure of reason? One might as well bemoan the wetness of water."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"So what are we doing with the spares?" Indrani asked.

It was bluntly put, as was her wont, but she wasn't wrong to ask the question. Ivah, after being further questioned, had been pretty clear: the only way for someone to pass through the Gloom was with the obsidian 'feathers' the drow were wearing. We'd had a corpse already, so one of us was covered. Two more prisoners had to be stripped of their armour to make sure we'd pass without trouble, though, and that left the issue of what we'd now be doing with them.

"We can't take them into the Gloom," I said. "Ivah was vague – I think it doesn't actually know a lot on the subject – but the implication was that we'd just 'lose' them the way Ranger got lost."

It was still night, though now dawn was a great deal closer. While Akua saw to the wounded, I'd told Indrani she should catch a nap. We'd be moving out as soon as she was rested, since I saw no point in idling around the surface any longer now that we had a guide. I softly inhaled the lingering scent coming from the cup of tea in my hand. Actually drinking it was nothing to write home about, but the smell was strangely pleasant. I'd though nothing of it, at first, but now that it'd become a habit I was realizing I'd seen something like this before. The fae in Skade had taken delight in small, ephemeral things too. A lot more than in the physical pleasures I'd once preferred.

"So that'd be releasing them, pretty much," Indrani mused. "I take it we have some issues with that."

"They came to the surface to slave and kill," I said. "It'd be irresponsible to simply let them loose after capturing them."

My friend shrugged, hazelnut eyes tinted with indifference. She'd yet to slip on her leather coat, or even her mail, wearing instead thick grey cloth cut close to her form. The only touch of panache to the drab attire was the dark linen scarf hanging from her neck, some kind of weave allegedly particular to Mercantis. It was certainly finer than anything I'd seen come out of Callowan weaver shops, and I knew it could be used to breathe through noxious fumes if she needed it to. It was one of the few possessions I'd ever seen Indrani care for, save for her bow. I'd gathered from idle talk that both were gifts from Ranger.

"So kill them," she said. "We never flinched at that before. Crucified a bunch of Praesi after Second Liesse, didn't you? Those you didn't make into your most expendable soldiers."

"They were all complicit in mass slaughter," I told her. "And it was the mages I had crucified, those who had a direct hand in the killing of innocents. This is different."

Killing Malicia's minion who'd tried to surrender came much closer to the line, in my eyes, but it'd been a trick played on an enemy. It felt like a step closer to becoming someone I cared little for to have played it in the first place, but I could swallow my discomfort.

"They're slavers, Cat," Indrani mildly said. "Kill them all, let the Gods sort it out."

"Their entire civilization practices slavery, as I understand it," I reminded her. "Should I murder my way through the whole lot?"

"Their entire civilization didn't pull blades on us," she said. "They did."

"Then we're killing them for pulling blades, not being slavers," I pointed out.

"Sure," Indrani said. "Let's kill them for that, then. I'll do it myself, if you're feeling contrary."

"My point was that we *don't* do that," I said.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered. "Cat, what else can we do? You don't want to release them and we can't keep them. There's not a lot left, is there?"

No, I grimly thought. There wasn't.

"Let them settle it the drow way, then," Indrani suddenly said. "You're being all lawful, so let them follow their own damned laws."

"They don't *have* laws, Archer," I replied in a low voice. "They seem to murder each other at the drop of a hat."

She met my eyes, the deep tan of her skin seeming even deeper under cover of dark.

"You need to make a decision," Indrani said, "about why we're going into the Everdark. Because if you're going down there to murder bigwigs until their people are terrified into playing nice, I'm on board. They have it coming, let them choke on it. But if you're just going down there for an army, Catherine, there's going to be darker lines to cross than this."

I grimaced, then looked away. Once more, she was not wrong. I'd known going in that this would be ugly business. My conversation with Ivah had

only lent weight to the notion. It was an odd thing to hear a person seeming otherwise perfectly reasonable to dismiss the rest of the continent as cattle and preach the virtues of cold-blooded murder without a hint of irony. Even the Praesi kept a veil over that, twisting the act into some kind of wicked art. The drow had spoke of killing without reason as if there was no need for pretext or justification, and I suspected it had not been one of the stronger Mighty. Those at the top of the pyramid would have swum through a sea of blood to get there, and it was them I'd need to make pacts with. Them and the Priestess of Night, who was the very architect of this bloody misery.

"I can't fix an entire empire," I admitted tiredly. "I can barely even handle Callow, and that's with a second born for the work."

"Then we don't pretend," Indrani said calmly. "We don't go in half-baked, posturing like we're liberators. Because that's how we lose, Catherine – by straying from what we're actually after. Don't swing for the toes if you want to cut a throat."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Even letting them settle it by their laws," I said quietly. "It's just posturing, isn't it? Foisting the dirty work onto them. The blood would still be on my hands, only with cowardice added to it."

"Responsibility's a bed of thorns," Indrani said. "You keep lying down and then getting surprised at the bleeding. It's not on you to save every stranger you meet. Especially if they don't *want* to be saved."

"Is it really too much to ask," I murmured, "that we get to behave like decent souls, for once?"

"There's a lot of those, at the feet of Above," my friend said. "They don't tend to stick around long down here."

Maybe I was a coward, because when I gave the order it was for drow to settle it among themselves. The fought, until two were dead. The most heavily wounded, though they might have survived if they'd not been slain. Their Night was harvested by their killers as I watched in silence.

But we put on the dead men's armour, and went into deeps.

—

I'd not been sure what to expect when we entered the Warrens. The Everdark was supposed to be a wreck, nowadays, its people fighting over faded glories they no longer knew how to restore. On the other hand, a lot of those tunnels should date back to when the drow had been more than a pack of backstabbers living in ruins of their own making. There wasn't a lot known about the days when the drow had been a power to reckon with: what records dated to when the era was theorized to have taken place were sparse and didn't tend to extend much further than whatever nascent city they'd been written in. In the echo Masego and I had eavesdropped on, the Wandering Bard had mentioned something called the Twilight Sages. That they'd 'considered death the only sin'. That didn't exactly sound like pacifism, but it was a long way from the drow encountered now. The territory of the Everdark on the surface was

smaller than Callow's, and nearly all of it mountainous, but then that didn't mean much: they were a subterranean people, like the dwarves and once upon a time the goblins. Their holdings would have been measured in depth more than in length or breadth.

The Warrens ended up being tunnels. Just that. Not particularly well-maintained ones, damp and cold and occasionally half-collapsed, but they weren't strewn with bones or filled with packs of monsters. I kept pace with Ivah, at the head of our little band, and the drow led us forward unerringly from tunnel to tunnel. It'd already been a few hours and I could honestly see no difference between the paths we'd taken at the occasional crossroads and those we had not. We were going deeper, that much I'd felt. But there were no markers, no signs our guide could be drawing on.

"How long before we enter the Gloom?" I asked.

Ivah flicked a silver glance at me.

"We already have," it replied.

My brow rose. I'd not felt so much as a speck of power. I was particularly sensitive to wards, nowadays, so the passing of a threshold should have been noticeable.

"I can see no difference between when we first entered and now," I admitted.

"Nor will you, Queen," it said. "We bear feathers. There is no Gloom for us."

"So if we didn't have the feathers," I said. "We... wouldn't have seen the tunnels?"

"We would see others," Ivah said. "Leading nowhere."

That didn't sound like a ward. More like a domain, honestly, though it was a terrifying thought there could be an entity out there powerful enough to keep a domain going for centuries.

"It seems too easy to cross," I said.

"The *nerezim* have pierced through before," Ivah said. "Never for long. They rip ore from the stone and leave, do not linger."

"You mean the dwarves," I said.

"That is so," Ivah agreed. "They have slain Mighty with great machines of steel. They are not cattle."

"Because they killed drow," I frowned.

My guide shook its head, rueful smile baring sharp white canines.

"Because to them, it is us who are cattle," Ivah said. "One does not fight *nerezim*. One survives them, hiding until their purpose is fulfilled and they leave once more."

Well, it was almost heartening to know the Kingdom Under had everyone as terrified underground as they did on the surface. I'd begun to suspect that the Gloom had been placed to make sure the madness of the Everdark remained contained, but now another candidate had emerged: it might just be a sorcerous moat to keep the dwarves at bay. The Kingdom Under was not known to tolerate rivals underground, as the ancient exodus of the goblins tribes to the surface had made abundantly clear. I let the conversation lapse after that,

though boredom saw me speak again when the journey through the tunnels continued to stretch on.

"You said you used to be a rylleh," I said. "What is that, exactly?"

"Dimas was rylleh," Ivah replied. "What you look upon never was."

"And what did it mean, when Dimas was rylleh?" I asked.

"To earn this honour, one must know twelve Secrets and slay another rylleh," Ivah said. "Even then, it is worthier to hold than to claim. Many do not last long."

I hummed.

"And Dimas?" I probed. "How long did they last?"

"A hundred years and three," Ivah proudly said. "Many tried to claim its Secrets, for Dimas knew the three glorious arts of killing."

My eyes narrowed. First at the revelation that my guide was over a century old. Scholars argued about how long drow could physically live, but most ascribed them a lifespan no longer than a human's. Apparently that was incorrect. More importantly, there'd been an implication to what Ivah said.

"Dimas knew these arts," I slowly said. "Ivah does not?"

The drow eyed me with surprise.

"Night was taken from Dimas, save the last sip," it said. "Tiarom knew no Secrets, and so none were learned from the harvest."

"You make it sound like there is more to the Night than the shadow tricks," I said.

"That is so," Ivah said, then touched its lips. "Shapeless and shaped, encompassing all. The worthy take. The worthy rise."

It's knowledge too, I realized.

"Those three glorious arts of killing, what are they?" I asked.

"Spear and blade and bow," Ivah said. "Dimas harvested many, to learn them whole. It was great accomplishment."

I breathed in sharply. So by killing someone who knew one of those Secrets they could just become a master swordsman instantly? That was *insane*. You couldn't just create knowledge out of nothing, that wasn't the way Creation worked. *Unless it's the same knowledge*, I thought. *Passed from killer to killer, since times immemorial.* Were they just passing around the same few learnings, one corpse at a time?

"Ivah," I quietly said. "Can someone add to the Night?"

"That is poor choice," the drow amusedly said. "What worth is there in empowering Mighty by one's death?"

"If a drow learned to make steel," I said. "And someone killed and harvested them. Would *they* know how to make steel?"

"Weapon-making is a powerful Secret," Ivah acknowledged. "The Ysengral hoard it mercilessly, and Ysengral itself hunts for the finest whispers."

So anytime someone learned anything useful they were murdered for it. Gods. No wonder they lived in ruins. If someone tried to restore them they'd probably get stabbed for the knowledge of how they wanted to do it.

"Is Ysengral a sigil or a Mighty?" I asked, slightly confused.

"A sigil is a Mighty," Ivah told me, tone implying I was a little slow.

"So Dimas' old sigil, Zapohar. . . " I prodded.

"Zapohar is Mighty, of great influence in the cabal of the Silent Song," the drow said. "Though forced out of Great Perun, the Zapohar are first of the inner ring. Many fear them."

"And was that how Dimas ended?" I asked. "Fighting for the Zapohar?"

"Dimas grew fat and lazy," Ivah bitterly said. "Forgot that many coveted its Secrets. That which broke it was worthier to hold them, and now stands second under Zapohar."

So backstabbed by an ambitious colleague, not beaten by an outsider. And still it seemed to feel some sort of pride for the Zapohar, instead of hatred towards the sigil that had seen it laid low. That smacked of Wasteland morals to me, the way Praesi highborn claimed that hatred and enmity were unrelated matters. It seemed a touchy subject, regardless, so I didn't press any further. There'd been something else I was curious about, anyway.

"Tell me about the Kodrog," I said. "We're heading into their territory, right?"

"They lurk near the Gloom, unfit for the strife of the inner ring," Ivah said with open disdain. "Kodrog's Night was thinned by the Mighty Soln, three hundred years past. It fled to the outer rings and has not returned."

"Soln didn't kill it?" I asked.

"Kodrog is said to know whispers from the Secret of Many Lives," the drow informed me. "A single death was not enough, though it lost much Night in defeat."

"I thought you said the Kodrog were strong," I pointed out.

"To meat," Ivah said. "To drow. To the least of the Mighty. Not to great sigils. It will crush you like an insect, Queen, but that is different matter."

"I wouldn't count on it," I mildly said. "Is it the Kodrog that gave you all your feathers?"

The drow shook its head.

"I journeyed to Great Mokosh under brand of disgrace, to be granted this last chance," Ivah said. "There the Sukkla discharge holy duty, having been granted sigil from the Sve of Night itself. Any can claim feathers, if they know the tongues of the Burning Lands and despair enough to try striding them."

"So it's a holy duty, to try the Burning Lands," I said. "Why?"

Ivah touched its lips once more.

"It serves the purpose of the Night," it said.

Oh, that did not sound all that pleasant.

"Killing cattle," I said. "Taking it. What does it do for you?"

"The Night grows," Ivah smiled. "To do such sacred act would redeem any disgrace."

"I want to be perfectly clear, here," I said. "If you kill humans, or any other race. It grows the Night?"

"That is so," the drow reverently said. "All is one. All is strife. The worthy rise."

I sucked at my lip.

"Killing undead," I said. "Would it also grow the Night?"

The drow paled.

"Speak not of the Hidden Horror," Ivah whispered. "For its crown is dawn, and that pale light is the end of all things. Only the mad would enter the eye of the Host of Death."

"It does, doesn't it," I said. "The necromancy that keeps its army walking, you can claim it for the Night."

"I say no more," Ivah insisted. "It sees all. It hears all."

Well, Neshamah had clearly paid these people a visit at some point after his ritual. The drow were a murderous bunch, they shouldn't be so scared unless the Dead King had spanked them roughly after being provoked. I honestly wasn't sure to root for there. Still, I was pleased to have learned that. If the undead had been of no worth to the drow's societal murder pyramid it would have been much, much harder to gain any ground there. Ivah had been pretty high up the ladder at some point, by the sound of it, but he'd still been someone's minion. The people on the notch above might be less terrified at the idea of a fight with Keter, if they were offered the right incentives. I had a few notions about what those mighty be, though the offer I knew would be most tempting was one I very much wanted to avoid.

"Let's talk about the Kodrog, then," I said. "I'm looking for practical information. Number of Mighty, which is known for what. How many fighters to they have, what are their defences like?"

I'd come with the intent to negotiate, but I might have actually found a place where my propensity to stab before making an offer would be considered reasonable. If I could get through without killing, I would. But if blades came out, well, it wouldn't be the first time I walked over a few corpses to get where I needed to be. Ivah had unfortunately little to share, since it'd been ushered through Kodrog territory into the Gloom after copious mockery and a few beatings, but little was better than nothing. By the sounds of it, there were a few thousand drow scattered across several large caverns but only a small part of those were considered fit to fight. Even fewer of those would be Mighty, which I'd mentally put in the same league as half a company of Watch. Dangerous, if you took them lightly, but rather killable. If Archer hung at the back taking care of those with fancy Secrets, Diabolist and I could handle the brawlers. Unlike on the surface, I didn't intend to take prisoners here. Wouldn't run down anyone fleeing either, but if they became an obstacle capture wouldn't be the objective.

It took us three days to leave the Gloom. Over the last stretch of the journey the tunnels changed from rough bare stone to something more ornate. Basrelief was carved on every surface, even the floor and ceiling, though the sculptures under our feet were covered by moss and dirt. It was my first look at

anything the drow had made, and to my utter lack of surprise pretty much everything depicted was their kind sallying out to the surface and winning glorious battles before returning to the Everdark covered in glory, riches and slaves. There were also depictions of single combat between drow champions, though oddly enough they did not seem to be to the death. The loser was made servant of the winner, carrying their spear and quiver. Honour duels? Those were supposed to be common in Levant. The Northern Steppes as well, though orcs didn't stop until one of the fighters was dead and dinner. The last step was a threshold carved into the tunnel, though one without gates, and there we found fresh signs of life. Symbols had been painted in blood over them, which Ivah informed me promised sundry torments to all venturing in the holdings of Mighty Kodrog.

"We now reach the realm of the Mighty, Queen," our guide told us.

I nodded.

"Bargain was struck," I said evenly. "We part ways now, if you wish, with no enmity or further demands."

The drow hesitated.

"I walk with you a little longer," it said. "Until we reach the ring of stones."

The Kodrog apparently held the remains of an old border fortress, which barred the entrance to their territory proper. It was probably as deep as Ivah could go without being openly associated with us.

"Follow behind, then," I said. "Archer, Diabolist – look sharp."

"Oh Gods, *finally*," Indrani whined.

I took the lead through the threshold, tough my advanced faltered after a single step. The others trailed in after me as I stood there in silence, ignoring the words they spoke. Well, we'd found the Kodrog. The cavern I'd entered was twice as large as the throne room in Laure, its uneven ceiling a natural dome. It could have fit at least a thousand comfortably, which I knew for a fact because it currently did.

The floor was covered with dead drow, thick as a carpet.

"Shit," I finally cursed. "I'd better not get blamed for this."

Chapter 54

Scavenger

> "One hundred and ninety-three: should your nemesis offer you a wager, a truce or delay for the first time always accept it. Villains with a fated heroic match have reached the peak of their power, whereas you and your companions can only grow."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

"That's a lot of dead bodies," Indrani noted. "Like, battlefield a lot, not 'the Woe has a bad day' a lot."

I ignored the attempt at humour. In someone else I might have attributed it to needing to cover up shock, but Archer didn't get those kinds of shivers. The benefits of being raised in a part of the world where every day a single misstep could get you killed by a raging monster-hunting lunatic. It was an uncomfortable truth that'd I'd gotten somewhat used to the sight of corpses as well, though not quite to my companion's extent. The drow who'd scuttled in behind us had gone still as statues, stricken by either terror or awe. I left them behind and waded into the pool of death. I knelt in lukewarm blood and guts, flipping over the nearest body to have a better look at it.

I immediately withdrew my hand.

"Cat?" Indrani probed, catching up to me.

"There's still Night in those," I said.

I knew that because I'd felt the eldritch power react to my own. Not an attack or an attempt to meld, but... almost like the darkness had been licking my hand. *Like it recognizes something larger and meaner, and tries to make friends.* I shivered, and it'd been a long time since any kind of cold had caused me to do that. The dead drow was badly mangled. The face had been smashed in, skull crushed through the eye socket, but it had an earlier wound. A bloody hole in its chest, near the centre. I stuck my fingers in there again, ignoring the feeling the Night eagerly pressing against Winter, and popped open the ribcage to have a closer look. There was an organ in there that looked somewhat similar to a human heart, though it had way too many veins coming out of it

and it stood deeper in the body – almost next to the spine, which at least was easily recognizable in shape. It was more grey than white, though, and oddly granular.

"That's going to be a pain to wash," Indrani commented, glancing at my now blood-drenched clothes.

"It was a crossbow bolt that did this," I said. "Look at the indent. It's similar to what Legion-issue makes on humans. Didn't go deep enough, so whoever did this had to finish them up close."

For all her many flaws, Archer had deep knowledge of the ways of murdering at a distance. When she turned her attention to the wound I was indicating her eyes narrowed.

"That's a much bigger mark than the crossbows Robber's minions used would have made," she said. "Bigger bolt, and much stronger impact. Honestly, it looks like it should have gone straight through."

Which would require much more force, if the head of the bolt was larger. Whoever had done this they had significantly better crossbows than the Legions of Terror fielded – when it came to the power of a shot, at least. Hard to tell the rate of fire from a single corpse.

"That points a damning finger already," I said.

The Dread Empire was hardly the only nation that fielded crossbowmen, though they did field the largest amount by a significant margin. I could honestly think of no Calernian power that wouldn't have crossbows in a field army, save for the Chain of Hunger. But Praes used a goblin crank model that was a significant improvement on what the likes of Procer and the old kingdom used. Better rate of fire, better range, better impact. Whoever had done this used a superior model, and I couldn't think of any power that could boast of one. Not on the surface, anyway. Indrani leaned forward, jostling the corpse from my grasp, and then leaned back with a frown on her face. She was looking at the eye wound, the one that'd broken the skull.

"Yeah, you're right," she said. "Look at the angle. Hammer – and it's absolutely a hammer that did this – came down all wrong for someone of the same height. That's dwarf work, unless there's another bunch of murderous little people running around the region."

I dropped the dead drow entirely, slowly rising to my feet. For a butcher's yard, this place smelled nothing like rotting flesh and blood. There was that coppery scent wafting around, but aside from that? Another physical oddity for this already strange race. My gaze swept across the slaughter, looking for the lay of it. Some bodies had obviously been dragged and dropped, but others had been left where they fell and from those I could try to piece together the events that had preceded our arrival.

"First volley hit them by surprise," Indrani said, come up at my side. "Look at the bodies there. Too many of them are face down, they were shot in the back."

I followed her pointed finger. The corpses were as she'd said, but that was not what drew my attention. The crossbows would have been fired from a passage leading roughly to my current left, but I could see it winding closer to my back. That should lead to either the Gloom itself or a cavern very close to it. Ivah *had* said that the dwarves sometimes pierced trough the Gloom, sending an expedition through to mine or claim other sources of wealth.

"Then the second volley went straight into the crowd, right there," Indrani mused, finger moving towards a handful of dead bodies closer to the centre. "That's interesting. You'll know what kind of tactics that is even better than me."

"Panic," I said. "They were inciting a panic, so the drow would try to flee instead of fight back. Which means. . . "

Our two gazes swept towards the right side of the cavern, where the other passage out could be seen. It was broader than the other one, would likely allow for twenty through at a time. The corpses near it were piled almost hip-high, not a single one coming closer than twenty feet of the passage.

"There was another force waiting there," I said. "So they're numerous enough to afford splitting up at least, assuming there's a single dwarven expedition at work here."

"They did it cold and methodical," Indrani grunted. "I'd guess they let the panic sink in before moving in the second force, so the drow wouldn't get desperate too early."

"It was mean to be a massacre since the beginning," I softly agreed. "They never intended to leave anyone alive."

"There's more. Look around. No structures in here, Cat," she pointed out. "Nowhere to huddle in, not even the beginnings of a camp site. So why were there at least a thousand drow in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"You think the dwarves slaughtered the entire tribe," I said. "Sigil, whatever."

"Whatever they're up to, it doesn't involve leaving survivors," Indrani shrugged. "This lot didn't give much a fight, by the looks of it. I'd bet they were bottom feeders who fled another battle and got cleaned up before the dwarves moved on."

"That's monstrous," I said, appalled. "I understand hitting those who can fight back, but civilians? Gods, Archer, I wouldn't be surprised if we found children in the piles should we look for them."

"There's a sense to it," she replied. "Hard sense, mind you, but still sense. Leave a bunch of Night-bearing corpses behind and the survivors will eat that. Possibly make trouble on the way out. No one can harvest if there's no one left."

"Fucking Hells," I said. "Is there a single place on Creation where we're not going to find atrocities if we scratch the varnish a bit?"

"This whole fucking place is an atrocity, Cat," Indrani dismissed. "All the dwarves did was heap another ugly day onto the pile."

My finger clenched. Her utter lack of sympathy for the drow was not without reason. But there was a difference between holding the responsible to account and shrugging off massacres. I'd wrestled with this before, when I had to make choices about the Empire. How many people in Praes could really be called at fault for the many sins of the High Lords? Farmers and shopkeepers did not get a voice in the run of the world, no matter whose banner they lived under. For every drow calling themselves Mighty and heedlessly partaking in the slaughter, how many thousands were just *meat*?

"Enough," I said. "We've got too many worries for me to be angry with you."

The other Named shrugged.

"Sure," she said. "We might consider this a useful turn, if not a good one. We need to get deeper, right? If we follow in the wake of the dwarves I expect we'll have an easier way of it than on our own."

"We don't know why they're here," I reminded her. "Or even were they're headed."

Indrani gestured down at the slaughter beneath us.

"That's not the opening move of someone after a few rubies, Cat," she said. "They're leaving no one behind, so it follows they're gonna be in the Everdark long enough they're worrying someone might raise a banner here before they return."

I reluctantly nodded. Not because I agreed following the dwarven expedition was our best bet, but to concede she was right about the logistics. The drow were terrified of the Kingdom Under, evidently with good reason, but this brutal a massacre wasn't something that would go unanswered. Even a rat bared its fangs when cornered. The entire affair reeked of calculated risk.

"This complicates things," I finally sighed. "It might be easier to find friends here, if the drow are under attack, but the price. . . "

"We're not picking a fight with the Kingdom Under," Indrani flatly said. "Not even the Lady does that. You kill a single dwarf and they won't send a complaint, they'll sink cities underground and slaughter everyone remotely involved. Maybe their relatives just to be sure. It doesn't matter if by some miracle you manage to beat the army they send, Catherine. They'll keep sending them, just get across the point that *you don't fuck with the dwarves*."

I glanced at her, surprised. I didn't disagree with what she'd said – odds were that if the Queen of Callow killed a dwarf then Laure would be a ruin before winter arrived – but I *was* taken aback by how vehement Archer was being about it. She'd always been, well, fearless. Occasionally to the point of foolishness, though that was not unusual for any of the Woe. Including myself. I'd been under the impression few dwarves ever came to Refuge, even though it probably the surface entity with the closest ties to the Kingdom Under. Save maybe Mercantis, but that was famously strictly business as all the relationships of the City of Bought and Sold tended to be.

"You won't get an argument from me," I said.

"Good," she said. "You got more on your plate, anyway."

"How's that?" I frowned.

Archer pointed down at the pond of corpses.

"That's a lot of Night, Cat," she said. "Even if they were all nobodies, that's a great many nobodies. You just going to leave that lying there?"

I'd been trying not to think about that, all the while knowing I would have to soon enough. I wasn't sure if I could devour the Night myself, but I did have Diabolist with me. If there was anyone would could tutor me in the basics of eldritch cannibalism it was Akua Sahelian. That'd still involve eating power from a source I only poorly understood, unaware of the possible long-term consequences. If Ivah had been upfront about what the Night was, then this could represent an extremely useful addition to my arsenal. I'd been running into old monsters more and more, of late. Older heroes, yes, but there was also the fact that the Dead King would be fielding an entire battalion of the most dangerous Named he'd been able to get his hands on. Having a much shallower bag of tricks than the opposition had cost me, in my last few fights, and I didn't have the time or the kind of opponents available that'd allow me to play catch up. Drawing on the ancestral knowledge of an entire race would, to be frank, be the perfect solution. That was the most obvious reason not to go through with this.

It was too good a solution, too perfect. Like it'd been handpicked for my problems. Mundane coincidence was not unknown to Creation – the Gods were not behind every stroke of fortune or disaster, even for Named – but this crucial a coincidence? No. It wasn't happenstance. I would go as far as to say I was inclined to believe this was a bid from Below. *Look at what you could get, if you start acting like a proper villain.* My last talk with the Dead King had involved a warning about the offers that would come knocking at my door. About the kind of stories that would be offered to me. I had not forgot it, even though it had been the least ominous part of what was spoken.

"No," I finally said. "I can't. It's too useful."

"Tell me you're not drinking dead drow juice," Indrani said. "You don't know where it's been, Cat, it could be full of diseases."

"Not me," I said, glancing back at the rest of our band.

The drow had gathered themselves while the two of us had been examining the massacre. None of them came within even spitting distance of the corpses, though, and from the looks of it one of them had thrown up against the cavern wall. Diabolist was still with them, though her eyes remained on the bodies. She was too well-taught to let her face betray her deepest thoughts, but the blankness of her expression was a hint in and of itself.

"Shit, you feeding them to Dubious Witch?" Indrani muttered. "Vivi's going to have a *fit* when she learns."

I waded back to dry land, boots trailing blood all over the stone. The drow visibly shrunk on themselves while Akua withdrew her gaze from the massacre's aftermath to meet my eyes.

"Catherine," she greeted me. "Have your deliberations come to an end?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "**Akua Sahelian, I forbid you to partake in Night**."

Diabolist shivered as my order sunk into the heart of her being, words writ into law. She threw me a reproachful glance, after gathering her bearings.

"I would not have so blundered, dear heart," she said. "Such power would not come without trappings or demands. I am more discerning in my usurpations."

"Then this shouldn't be a problem," I replied flatly.

She could argue all she wanted that she wouldn't have done it, it was bad form to give an alcoholic the keys to a liquor shop. Even when they told you they didn't like the bottles on the shelves.

"As you say," Diabolist murmured, bowing her head.

I turned to the drow. I'd gotten used to them over our journey, well enough I no longer had trouble telling them apart. Ivah was the only one who talked regularly, even among each other. The former guide shifted uneasily when my gaze came to rest on it.

"Ivah," I said. "Are you still set on us parting ways?"

Silver eyes narrowed.

"I am reconsidering this matter, Queen," it said.

"Good," I smiled. "Then I have a bargain for you. I still need a guide to Holy Tvarigu, or at least someone who can take me to the path that leads there. If you're willing to be that guide, I can offer safety on the way there."

I paused, then glanced at the corpses behind me.

"There would be other benefits, were you so inclined," I added.

The drow's face creased in thought.

"You would grant me right to harvest all of them?" it probed.

"So long as you can do it in a reasonable amount of time," I said. "I want to get a move on as soon as possible. I don't suppose it's possible to take all of the Night at once?"

"There are rites to do this," Ivah admitted. "Yet I know them not. It could take more than hours to finish this. The act of harvest is tiring."

"If I may intervene?" Akua asked.

I nodded at her.

"If simply gathering the Night is the issue," she said. "I believe we can be of assistance."

"You can drain all those dry?" I said, jutting a thumb at the dead.

"The power itches to be held," Diabolist said. "It would not fight us in this."

"And contamination?" I pressed.

I got the impression the shade had to hold back from rolling her eyes.

"I have struck bargains with demons and devils most ancient," Akua said. "This is ancient work, to be sure, and strong. It is also incredibly simplistic. I am no green warlock, drunk on the success of binding an imp."

"Gods, you sound like Masego only two parts more Evil," I muttered. "Fine, I didn't mean to impugn your talent at short-sightedly endangering the very

fabric of Creation to try winning battles you ended up losing anyway on account of being kind of a fuckup."

I heard Archer choke behind me.

"That was unnecessary," Diabolist said, sounding genuinely miffed.

"Don't know about that," Indrani mused. "*I* got a laugh out of it."

Ivah's eyes were moving from one of us to the other in sequence as we spoke, face visibly split between fear and befuddlement. I suspected the Mighty weren't keen on banter with their underlings. What little I knew implied they were pretty direct about having their displeasure felt, though in all fairness that made me the pot mouthing off at their kettle.

"The terms stand, with the addition that we'll help you gather Night at least this once," I told the drow.

Ivah did not need to mull over it much longer.

"I would accept your bargain, then," it said.

I nodded, pleased.

"Give me a moment to phrase the oath," I said.

"That will not be necessary, Queen," Ivah said.

My brow rose. Trust already? We'd only struck one bargain, and I'd needed it for urgent purpose. The silver-eyed guide smiled thinly, reading my surprise.

"This will make me drow again," it said. "Drow neither give nor take oaths."

"That's rather inconvenient," I frankly replied.

Would it try to betray us the moment it had a bit of power under the belt? I wasn't overly worried about it hurting us, Secrets or no Secrets, but it'd be a pain to have to find another guide so soon after empowering the last one. A closer eye needed to be kept on it, then. I gave Diabolist a meaningful glance, getting the slightest of nods in response.

"Let's get this done," I said. "Akua, I'm getting the impression that improvising here would be a bad idea."

"Your discernment remains impeccable," Diabolist said, without a hint of irony.

I smothered a grin. The diabolism quip had actually gotten under her skin, which was just delightful.

"If I may?" she said, extending her hand towards me.

I nodded and she made contact with the bare skin of my neck. It felt... like when we'd fought together against the Skein, but softer. Access granted but not power. Her thoughts bloomed right under my fingertips, little whispers of knowledge and intent.

"Extend your will," she murmured.

I closed my eyes. I could feel the Night wriggling in the bodies. She'd been right to say it was itching to be held: it responded eagerly to even the slightest of approaches. My mind covered the whole of the cavern – close to the perception that emerged when others entered my domain, but somehow incomplete. There was no inherent understanding here. I was blindly groping my way.

"Call it," Akua said.

To me, I ordered. The Night slithered out of the corpses like a tide of snakes, eating through dead flesh. It hesitated, but I lashed it with my will and called it closer. It became easier the more I exerted myself, as if I'd overcome its hesitation. I spun it into a sphere until it grew larger than a person, then told it to contract. When I opened my eyes, there was only a pinprick of darkness hovering in the air before me.

"Ivah," I said. "Now."

The drow approached and bowed towards the Night, beginning cadenced whispers, but they fell away from my ears. I was looking into the small piece of darkness, and seeing beyond it. Through it.

I was not the only one looking.

There was a face, but I could only make out the barest contours because of the eyes: deep and perfect silver, they were glaring harshly in otherwise absolute darkness.

Splendid, a woman's voice spoke into my ear.

"Who are you?" I asked.

Ah, perhaps not. Merely usurper. What an unusual creature you are.

I could feel her mind scuttling across my own, like a spider on glass. Feeling out the shape of it, tasting the power. It went both ways. Her soul, her mantle was no thick bundle of power. It was an impossibly large web of the thinnest possible strings, spread out so far and wide I could scarcely comprehend it.

"You're not the Night," I said. "I can feel you too, Named."

I sensed you tread the Gloom with stolen feathers. Felt you come to me, purpose on your lips.

"Sve of Night," I whispered. "I seek audience with you."

So take it, the woman laughed. *What stays your hand?*

"You're under attack," I said.

All is strife. The Tenets will hold, or they will break. Only the worthy rise.

"Then you're willing to talk," I tried. "We need to-"

All paths lead to Tvarigu. I await you beyond the reach of dawn.

Silver light shone, blinding, and for a heartbeat I thought I saw her whole. A colossal silhouette, limbs outstretched and shivering in pain. Then I saw only the cavern and the concerned looks of my companions.

"Fuck," I said feelingly. "This just keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

Chapter 55

Outskirts

> "Over the month I spent in Atalante I witnessed no fewer than two hundred debates take place under the gaze of the pale statues of the Temple of Manifold Truths, for the people of the city delight in such exercises of rhetoric as those of Stygia delight in bloodsport. The subjects varied from the purpose of mankind to the proper shape of apples, though the true wonder of the place was that I do not believe a single speaker left the Temple believing they had been wrong."
>
> Extract from 'Horrors and Wonders', famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

I'd come across more than my fair share of impressive fortifications, over the years. Summerholm, the river-straddling Gate of the East. Liesse, whose walls had been old and half-abandoned yet still holding sorcery powerful enough to give pause to the full might of the Summer Court. Ater, the Dread Empire's own capital, with towering walls and massive gates that had held strong under the Tower's shadow for millennia. Keter, Crown of the Dead, a haunting spire of rock beholden to no laws but the Dead King's that had turned back crusade after crusade. This, though? This was laughable. There were fortifications in northern Callow, a region that had not known the touch of war for a hundred years before Procer created the passage, that were greater than this. When Ivah had called the 'fortress' at the edge of Kodrog territory a ring of stones, I'd thought it half-poetry. Daoine and the eastern stretches of Callow boasted old fortifications called the same thing, ancient broken-down forts used in wars that predated the unification of the kingdom and peace with the Deaoraithe. Many of them had been made into the heart of small towns and villages, the hill-forts used as a guild hall or minor noble's seat. What I was looking at right now was not that: it was a literal ring of stones.

A few narrow tunnels had led us out of the butcher's yard and into what had once been the lands of the Kodrog, our first approach into another large cavern almost intimidating. There were no corpses to be found, but thrice we came across trails of blood on the stone where dead drow had been dragged. The

way into the great cavern was through an angle slope, narrow as the tunnel that had led us there, and part of me noted that this was a natural chokepoint. Easily defendable with a company of crossbowmen and some half-way decent infantry. The ancient drow apparently agreed, for mere feet beyond the end of the slope the ring of stones stood. The sight of it had me raising an eyebrow in skepticism. It wasn't indefensible, really. The slabs of granite making a loose circle of upright stones could serve as a curtain wall of sorts. Or they would have been able to, without the large gap in the slabs just to the side. Anyone could just... walk right in. That wasn't a fortification so much as a decoration. The dwarves had apparently been of the same opinion, because they'd wasted no time filling it with corpses.

I'd had dinner with Baroness Anne Kendal, after ascending to the throne, and over pheasant she'd praised me for how quickly I'd reacted to Akua unleashing devils at First Liesse. Said that most would have been stricken with terror, and that my swift decision to 'conscript' everyone in the city had saved dozens of thousands of lives. I'd not quite had the heart to tell her by then I'd bared blades at things scarier than mere devils. When I came knocking at the gates of Liesse with the Fifteenth, even my legionaries no longer flinched in the face of the hosts of Hell. Masego had called it *horror fatigue*. The way some people beheld so much terror their standards shifted and sights that would have once horrified them grew mundane. It was apparently a common phenomenon among Praesi sorcerers. On occasion it led to diseases of the mind, he'd noted, when mages witnessed so many terrors that it was the mundane matters of the rest of the world that grew eldritch to their eyes. I wondered if I was inching towards that, one slaughtering yard at a time, because the aftermath of brutality no longer stirred any great feeling in me.

Most the corpses in the fort had not been slain there. There were tracks leading to tall piles beneath the stones, and even taller ones inside the circle. If there had been marks of fighting there, they were now buried in death. I heard Archer come towards me as I stood a handful of feet from the piled dead within the embrace of raised stones.

"The trail leads north," Indrani said.

I nodded.

"Did it betray anything about their numbers?" I asked.

"Hundreds, at least," she shrugged. "Hard to tell the difference between those and thousands on stone grounds. There's tracks though, from carts or something else on wheels. Heavy things, I'm pretty sure even the wheels are metal."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched. It had always helped me think, but there was too little to go on here to make any real deductions. It might be carts to carry whatever they'd come for back to the Kingdom Under. They could be supply wagons. They could be machines of war, as Ivah had said the dwarves sometimes used to slay the Mighty. Hells, it could be all of that. We wouldn't

know for sure unless we took a look with our own eyes, and that struck me as a bad idea for all sorts of reasons. I glanced at Indrani.

"Do we know what's north?" I said.

"Ivah says it's the core territories of the Kodrog," she replied. "We're still in the outskirts of the outer rings. I'll be at least a few days of travel before we reach the first ruins."

Piecing together the lay of the Everdark from what my guide was very willing to share had been difficult, even though Ivah was trying its best. The drow considered too many things to be self-evident to be a proper informant. The outer rings, as far as I could tell, were the drow territories outside the loose web of underground cities that had once made up their empire. Those were the harshest battlegrounds of their people, and a gathering place for the strongest Sigils and cabals. The inner ring, singular, was vaguer in what it covered. From context, it seemed to mean all the territories between the old cities. There the tribes that'd been forced out of the cities fought against each other, murdering their way to enough power to try to get a foot in a city again. The cities were where the strongest of the Mighty gathered, Ivah had said, but the inner ring was where a Sigil could be wiped out in a night. Those that fled that underground sea of carnage eked out a living in the outer rings, but pickings were sparse out here. It was uncommon for a Sigil that bolted to the outskirts to make a comeback, even if they bided their time for a few decades.

Holy Tvarigu was at the centre of the madness, the handful of paths leading to it guarded by powerful Sigils who were said to rival those of the cities. We'd need to gather strength and support, before trying those.

"There's one last thing," Indrani said. "I found black blood."

My eyes narrowed. That meant a Mighty. Ivah had been clear that the more Night a drow held, the deeper the changes to their body. I had no reason to distrust that: after reaping the harvest of the cavern it had visibly changed.

"Show me," I said.

"Sure," she said. "It's not far. Want to grab our favourite scavenger in case there's a survivor?"

"Might be for the best," I agreed.

And still she did not move. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Archer?"

Her lips thinned.

"You all right, Cat?" she asked. "You've been looking at dead bodies for a while. And not that long ago you were hearing voices."

"Just the one," I sighed. "And that was the Priestess of Night, I'm sure of it."

"I'm sure you believe that," Indrani delicately said.

"I'm not quite that far gone," I reassured her. "Anyways, I'm not going morbid on you. I was actually wondering why they're not burning the bodies. Wouldn't it make more sense?"

"Not a lot of firewood down here," she replied. "And you need that or oil to get a good pyre started."

"I really doubt the dwarves ready to commit mass slaughter without tallying proper supplies," I said. "If they're really killing everyone to make sure there can be no harvest, it'd be logical to burn the dead. Can't claim Night from ashes, I don't think."

"If they're as prepared as you say, they'll have a reason for it," Indrani pointed out. "I try not to spend too much time figuring out why dwarves do what dwarves do. You'll only end up with a headache and an empty purse by trying."

"We're missing something," I told her. "I'm not gonna go digging in corpses to find out – we don't have the time to spare – but it's worth asking questions."

"Somehow I doubt our little band of murderers is going to have a good explanation for you," she said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, let's grab our minion. We're wasting daylight, even if we can't see it."

The rest of our company wasn't far. I'd learned why the drow were so afraid of coming close to the corpses, after a little chat with Ivah. It'd said it wasn't the death that scared most of them. It was all the Night that waited there to be taken. By beating them down, we'd established ourselves as higher on the pecking order. Drow who eyed Night ripe for harvest when stronger drow were around tended to end up killed just to make sure there'd be no trouble. Diabolist was keeping an eye on the prisoners, but Ivah was visibly itching to have a look at the corpses. It didn't consider itself strong enough to just harvest the Night no matter what we said, then. Good. As long as it was afraid of us, it'd uphold its part of the bargain with no qualms.

"Ivah," I called out. "With us. Archer has found a Mighty's blood trail."

"I follow, Queen," the silver-eyed creature smoothly replied.

Its eyes were brighter, now, but that was the least of the changes. Where before it had been stooped by days of travel with limited supplies and little sleep, now its back was ramrod straight and its stride had grown assured. The skin was still pale grey, but now and then from the corner of my eyes I could have sworn I saw small arcane patterns of Night shine on its bare arms. I suspected there'd been other changes less obvious, though it was hard to gauge something like senses and reflexes without actually testing them. The rest of the cavern beyond the ring of stones was a great deal less bloody. There were trails and footsteps on the dust and dirt, but little else. A handful of leather tents and fire pits skirted the edge of the walls, not enough to shelter more than a few hundred drow. There was at least twice that in dead inside the fort, which meant the corpses had likely been gathered from other tunnels and caverns. Three passages out could be found. Two heading north, side-to-side, and one towards the east. It was that last one Indrani led us towards.

Unlike the last stretch of tunnels out of the Gloom, these were not carved or sculpted. Apparently even when the realm of the drow had still been worth such a name, this had been considered the edge of nowhere. We passed through

a small cave half-filled by ponds of water, though they'd all been fouled by dirt and blood, and only found what Indrani had mentioned after another stretch of winding tunnel. There was a naked body, which she hadn't mentioned, but it was easy to see why. It was a ruined wisp of a cadaver: the head had been pulped, but the rest was a ruin without needing wounding. It looked like it'd been exsanguinated, drained of all fluids and insides until all that was left was paper-thin grey skin and hollow bones. In other news, drow did have genitalia no matter how they called themselves: this one had a cock, though it was as much a shrivelled husk as the rest of it. Black blood and brain fluids formed a blasphemous halo around the wreck of the head, but that wasn't the interesting part. From the body another trail came. There were bits of blood in it, but also some sort of transparent fluid gone dry. A sticky, stinking trail led from the corpse deeper into the passage ahead.

"Another twenty feet of crawling, then whatever came out got on its feet," Indrani said. "From there it's just drip. Haven't touched the body yet, figured you'd want the honours."

"Kind of you," I drily said. "Ivah, anything to say?"

"This is not known to me," the drow admitted. "Though none but Mighty would have blood so dark."

Less than helpful. I knelt by the body, gingerly raising it. Immediately my eyebrows climbed up. The entire back was messed up, like something had ripped its way out forcefully. Almost no blood, though. At a guess, whatever had left the trail was responsible.

"Looks like our friend here had one last trick up their sleeve," I said. "Ivah, you mentioned something called the Secret of Many Lives to me once. Would this be what it looks like in action?"

"I have never witnessed this with my own eyes," the drow said. "Only heard rumours. Yet if this is true, we look upon the body of Mighty Kodrog. Or one who slew them and claimed the whispers."

"Let's find out," I grimly said.

I left the body there. There was no Night in it, and I wasn't sure I should let Ivah harvest it even if there was. We set out again, though the trip was amusingly short. Maybe sixty feet further, after the trail of dried fluids had ended, another corpse was waiting. Its head had been pulped as well. There was another trail, and we didn't stop to check the body before following this time. Apparently the dwarves hunting Kodrog has lost patience, because when we found the next body not even twenty feet further around a corner it was thoroughly demolished. No flesh or bone had been left untouched, the remains more smear than corpse. And still a trail crawled away from it. I heard a rasping breath, further ahead. Had the hunters missed the last rebirth?

"There's something still breathing," I announced, and pressed on at a pace.

Indrani snorted.

"Yeah, not surprised," she said. "Look at the fluids, Cat. It didn't crawl away, it was dragged."

Honestly the trail looked to me exactly like the others, but she was the tracker and I was the city girl. Regardless, we did not make the survivor wait long. I almost winced at the sight, after we stumbled across it. This particular body was no husk like the others, though it might wish otherwise. The naked drow had been nailed to the tunnels' wall with iron spikes through the shoulders and calves, limbs flopping listlessly. The drow's eyes were closed, but I could hear it breathe just fine. It was still rather improbably alive. Ivah breathed in sharply, and earned a curious look for it.

"This is Mighty Kodrog itself," my guide said. "The wound splitting the lip in half, it is famed. The blade of the Mighty Soln caused it."

There *was* a rather nasty scar and chunk of missing flesh parting the drow's lower lip in half. More interesting were the nigh-invisible patterns of Night covered Kodrog's face, surrounding the closed eyes like they were some sort of spider web. It looked like a tattoo of arcane symbols I was unfamiliar with, though a very faint one. Apparently the repeated rebirths had weakened the Mighty considerably.

"It's unconscious," I said. "Let's drag it back to camp, see if we can wake it up there."

"You're going to have to handle the spikes," Indrani said. "That's solid rock they were hammered into. Not sure I could pull them out."

I grimaced but got to work. The difficult part was doing it carefully enough I wouldn't rip up Kodrog's body, not taking them out, and greyish blood began pouring out the moment they were removed. No longer black, huh. Someone had had a rough week. I froze the wounds shut, which was about as much as I knew of healing, and hoisted the drow over my shoulder when it became clear the pain wasn't enough to wake it up. Ivah was looking at me carrying a Mighty like a bag of potatoes like it didn't know whether it should be amused or appalled. The walk back was quicker, though I was careful not to jostle the goods. In part because I didn't want to worsen the bleeding, in part because when strangers dangled their dangly parts against me I preferred fewer gaping wounds being involved. A rustle when through the prisoners when we returned bearing our newest addition, a few whispered words in Crepuscular being traded. Kodrog was the only word I recognized. I lowered said burden to the floor carefully and smiled at Akua, who'd silently approached.

"I've got a surprise for you," I cheerfully said.

"Joy," Diabolist drawled. "More half-dead drow. My favourite. I expect you want me to attend to it?"

"If anyone's going to know what happened here, it's that one," I said. "I need it capable of talking."

"That much I can promise," the shade noted. "How *long* it will remain that way is more chancy a matter."

"Do what you can," I said.

"Ugh, does that leave me on guard duty?" Indrani asked. "Because that's really tedious. You won't even let me make them fight."

"I'm sure Ivah can inform them of the consequences of acting out," I said, casting an eye as said drow.

It nodded slowly.

"Find me in what direction the dwarves went," I told Archer. "Try to find out numbers, or anything more than we have. If you run into any of them. . . "

"Stay out of sight, head back immediately," she said. "I've got it. How long you giving me?"

I chewed my lip.

"We'll need a while for the interrogation," I said, watching Akua begin to remove the ice I'd shut the wounds with. "We might as well make camp here. A few hours, at least, but careful not to get lost."

"I never once in my life got lost," Indrani assured me.

"Last month you told me you'd been sober your whole life," I noted. "You really should start picking better lies."

"That sounds like a horrible way to live," Indrani said.

I rolled my eyes.

"Just don't get killed," I said. "Or start another war. Gods know we already have a net surplus of those, and the year's not even over."

She waved me away in a less than reassuring gesture, but she adjusted her bow against her shoulder and got moving towards the north-leading passages. She might give me backtalk the way sparrows flew, but I knew I could trust her to pull through when I needed her. I had few worries about her reconnaissance.

"Now would be a good time to inform your fellows we're camping," I told Ivah. "They're free to scavenge tents and necessities, though they are not to touch the Night."

"As you say, Queen," the drow nodded.

I watched it walk over to the others, then returned my attention to Akua. I dropped down next to the body in a seat, watching her work Winter into dying flesh. There was Night in this one, though unlike the one in the corpses it was not reaching for me. Neither was it hostile, though. It was just there. A tool in someone's hand, firmly grasped.

"How's it looking?" I asked.

"More than halfway into the grave," Diabolist said. "Which eases my work a great deal."

I didn't need to ask her why. What instincts my mantle had granted me made me aware that Winter held dominion over death and decay, among other things. I'd dabbled in necromancy as the Squire, but I remained an amateur at the art. When Akua had ridden my body, she'd raised an army of dead Procerans without even using a ritual.

"It's a recurring pattern, with you," the shade said. "That you use and demand others use powers in way that seem ill-suited to them."

"Power's a tool," I said, repeating someone else's words. "The only limit to its use is your own cleverness."

"Spare me the Carrion Lord's lessons, if you would," Akua said. "I have heard them before. My point stands. Even as the Squire your use of your limited necromantic abilities was admittedly inspired. Never before had I seen someone kill their own flesh to better wield it."

"Desperation is a sharp teacher," I grunted.

"So it is," Diabolist mildly said. "Still, you extend this philosophy beyond the boundaries I expected."

I scoffed.

"How's that?"

"This entire enterprise, dearest," Akua said. "To be frank, I am still somewhat at a loss as to why we now tread the passages of the Everdark."

"You were there when the decision was made," I reminded her. "I –"

"Need an army, yes," she interrupted. "Surely that is not all of it? I surmised this to be the excuse you gave to mask deeper purpose."

"I don't lie when holding council with the Woe, Akua," I said. "Even when you're there."

Scarlet eyes considered me skeptically.

"Then you truly came to gather a host of drow?" she said. "That seems ill-advised."

I frowned at the casual dismissal. Still, I'd let her out of the box for a reason. She had a better grasp on the corridors of power than any of the Woe, and if she had something to say it was worth hearing. Not necessarily heeding, but at the very least listening to.

"You're aware of our military situation," I said.

"I am, to an extent," she agreed. "The Battle of the Camps thinned the ranks overmuch, which led you to seek the Dead King in the first place. There was need for the hosts of Procer to be sent elsewhere and bled. This has already been achieved, Catherine, by the Empress' own pact."

"Look deeper," I said. "What's the thing that keeps Callow afloat?"

"Farming," she replied without missing a beat. "I do not disagree with you on the implication, my dear. Your kingdom has weathered a large-scale rebellion, the invasion of the Courts and my own works. If the Army of Callow recruits as heavily as it must to be more than a border garrison, there will be lack of field hands come harvest. Which would have consequences more disastrous in Callow than most realms, admittedly, as it boasts little but fertile fields."

My own works, she'd said. Almost nonchalantly. Three words for over a hundred thousand souls. The urge was there to simply tear her in half. Pop her head with a squeeze of my fingers, have Winter itself devour her from the inside. I pulsed with the need of it. *And you feared I might grow attached, Vivienne,* I thought. *That I might come to see her as more than the useful devil on my shoulder.* I mastered myself, kept the flare of rage away from my face. Not even a slight cooling of the air betrayed it. I'd learned the ways of my mantle well. It would not do to punish her for this, no. Best she keep speaking

those words, those barbed reminders of who it was I had murdered into my service.

"Then you know why I need another force on the field," I said. "One that can take the losses I can't afford."

"There are others you might have sought," Akua noted. "Lord Black still fields legions, and his fondness for you is well-known."

"Black's running a game in Procer," I said. "I don't know what it is yet, because I don't know what he's really after. If he intended to depose Malicia, his opening was just after Second Liesse. He went to the Vales instead, prepared for the crusade. He had most of a year, Diabolist. To plan and plot. It's not *happenstance* that the Vales were collapsed and he's wandering the heartlands of the Principate. He's trying to accomplish something. The Gods only know what it is, if even that. I'm not getting in the middle of that mess without a very good reason."

"You have ties to the sole Court of Arcadia," Diabolist noted. "Bargain might have been struck there."

"You think that's better than the drow?" I snorted. "Last time I went for a spin with the King of Winter, I got taken for a ride. I doubt I've learned enough in the last year to turn that around, and you can be sure that any pact made with Arcadia will result in the fae having a permanent foothold on Creation. I might as well start calling on fucking demons – those are easier to put away after you let them loose."

"The Dread Empire-"

"Was a possibility I considered," I interrupted flatly. "Of course, to get my hands on any of its armies I'd need to climb the Tower and make it stick. Which means I'll likely have to assault a few of the most heavily fortified cities on the continent with my already mangled forces. Possibly fight Malicia's loyalist Legions as well. Losses are certain, and even if I win I inherit a mess. Ashur's still sacking the coasts, Akua. I can't call myself Empress and just... leave them to it. Not to mention the dangers inherent to killing the person that let the Dead King out. Could mean he has to retreat, which would fuck over a now even more wounded Callow. We'd have to go back and negotiate, assuming he's even willing. Or it could mean he's loose with *absolutely no leash on him*."

"I believe you underestimate the amount of support a bid for the Tower would find in the Wasteland," Diabolist said. "There are promises that could see many flock to your banner."

"Oh, I know all about those kinds of promises," I murmured. "There are some prices even I balk at paying. I will not wade into a snake pit just to try turning the snakes on my foes, Akua. I have no intention of ever ruling Praes."

"You may not have a choice," Diabolist mildly said. "Though I shall let the matter lie. It will come to your door without any need for my advocacy."

"You should hope not," I replied. "If Praes is made my problem, I will not be gentle in how I solve it. Should we go over our other options? The League won't talk with me if the Hierarch won't, and the man is both mad and stubborn as a

mule. The Chain of Hunger cannot be treated with to any real degree, the elves would shoot any envoy of mine on sight and the closest thing the Gigantes have to an ally – Levant – is currently at war with me. You think I'm stalking these fucking tunnels because I want to? *I need the men and there is no one else*."

The last sentence came out in a hiss, almost like a wound lanced of pus.

"I understand," Akua said.

"No, you don't," I replied. "I drew a line in the sand, after my coronation. That if all I could accomplish was make a ruin out of Callow, I would melt the godsdamned crown and go into exile. Or walk to the gallows, if that was what it took. The crusade was always going to come, there was nothing I could do about that. But now, Diabolist, even if my armies win the coming battles the kingdom is fucked. We were already a bad summer away from widespread food shortages, when I left. How do you think it will go if the fields are empty at harvest? Either this works, or I'm done. I capitulate, do whatever is necessary for Hasenbach to offer terms that aren't complete subjugation and kill as many problems as I can before I die."

"You are what keeps this together, Catherine," Akua warned me. "If you abdicate, the kingdom collapses into anarchy. Malicia will likely invade and even the League might be swayed by such a tempting feast. Do you think Callow can weather the Dead King without you?"

"The question isn't 'will it bad?'," I said. "Of course it'll be awful. Even if I clean up every loose end I can before going, it'll be a shitshow. The question that needs to be asked is 'will it be worse if I'm wearing the crown?'."

"The only reason Callow was more than a waypoint on Cordelia's way to Ater is that your power gave the Principate pause," Diabolist said. "This is... navel-gazing in the worst of ways. Do you think you are responsible for every disaster to plague your homeland?"

"They happened on my watch," I said. "I had a responsibility. If I'd fucking bled you like a pig at Liesse, no matter the consequences to me, a hundred thousand people would be alive today. Winter went after Marchford because it was my demesne. Summer torched a third of the south to match Winter. And the Liesse Rebellion... well, you weren't the only person I should have killed then and let's leave it at that."

"It is absurd to pretend to you did not mitigate the damage inflicted," Akua flatly said. "You dispersed the Courts yourself. To clarify, you drove back forces as older than the First Dawn at the mere cost of a *few leagues of burned land*. Who else could have brought the invasions to an end at even twice that cost? And let us not pretend to you were the only possible pawn for Winter's king. The Courts did not emerge in Praes, where bargains would have been eagerly taken, or fractious Procer or the squabbling lands of the Dominion. Why, I wonder? It is almost as if Callow was easiest prey, the most vulnerable locale. You ended the Liesse Rebellion on lenient terms, your mere existence enough to soften the stances of both the Carrion Lord and the Empress against those who raised banner against the Tower. Not a matter in which either would otherwise

have been prone to so mild a response. Had you not been on the field at Second Liesse, I would very likely have slain your teacher and triumphed. You seem under the misapprehension that the rest of the continent fights over Callow because you bear the crown. That is disingenuous. Callow suffers because it is *weak*. Because greater powers can afford to make it a tool to expunge their own troubles. The Principate, the Empire, half the heroes that flocked to the Tenth Crusade. Do you truly believe your kingdom, even under a villainous queen, is greater threat to Good and Calernia than the Kingdom of the Dead? Than the Chain of Hunger?"

"There's a balance of power," I said. "The Grey Pilgrim admitted as much."

"Indeed," Akua sneered. "The Principate cannot afford too many powers sworn to Evil at its borders, is it? Yet you could have been made friend, through the right treaties. Can the same be said of the Hidden Horror? Yet is is Callow that was marched upon, and Praes beyond it. Because if the First Prince had called for a crusade against Keter, none would have answered. Because against the Kingdom of the Dead the Principate did not believe it could win, and Callow was *weaker*."

"You stated the very reason," I grimly smiled. "Against Keter, she did not believe she could win. And so the strategic reality was that a villainous queen in Callow was unacceptable. You're also dismissing the fact that it was your own fucking doomsday fortress, built on a massacre of my countrymen it is worth remembering, that served as the rallying cry for this mess."

"I will not defend what I did," Akua said. "There is nothing defensible about failure, and my means were abhorrent to you. Yet I will remind you that Procer loomed at the gate long before my works took place. I served as an excuse, it is true. And for my sins judge me as you will, for that is your right and privilege as victor. Yet even had you slain me long before, excuse would have been found sooner or later – Praes ruling Callow was no more acceptable than your bearing a crown, after all. You are a justification, Catherine. You are not a *motive*. At best, you were ancillary to the reasons forces went into motion."

"I could have gone the other way," I said. "I was made an offer, in Liesse. If I'd signed up with the Heavens-"

"You would have been slain, fallen upon by the full roster of the Calamities and your own allies," she said. "The Black Knight, deeming your existence a failed experiment, would have set to ensuring Callow was incapable of rising in rebellion when Procer came calling. I need not remind you of the manner of methodical butchery your teacher is capable of."

"So that's your fine wisdom?" I mocked. "Thousands died under your watch but it's all right, because thousands would have died either way?"

"Yourself and the Woe, the Fifteenth you assembled painstakingly," Akua said. "All of these are the only reason anyone of import on this continent considers Callow *worth treating with*. Gods Below, Catherine, do you think without your casting a long shadow the Empress would have waited this long to act? That the Carrion Lord would not have excised treason out of your king-

dom? The First Prince may claim to despise all you stand for, yet she stills speaks with you. Because you wield power, warrant fear, and this means the land you rule over are more than a subject to squabble over after someone wins the war. Without the might you have assembled, the only Callow that exists is that which other powers allow to exist. Is this the sorrow you mull over late into the night? That your acts, though bloody, have made your homeland actor instead of *spoils*?"

"You don't know that," I said. "If I'd never taken Callow in hand, heroes could have risen. They have before, with reliability that borders on law."

"The same heroes the Empire repeatedly smothered in the crib for decades before your birth?" Diabolist gently said. "Or perhaps foreign heroes, from the same nations now marching on you."

"It's better to be Proceran vassals than a wasteland, Akua," I tiredly replied. "And despite my best efforts we seem to be headed that way."

"I know few things about your people, and much I thought known has been proven false," the shade said. "Yet how many of them would agree with what you just spoke?"

"A crowd has only one voice, and no wisdom to utter," I quoted. "My people aren't always right, especially when pride is on the line."

"And so now your argument is that you know better," Akua said. "That you should make the choices for them. Yet you deplore having done that very thing. With some defeats to show for it, yet also admirable successes. What brave soul do you happen to use for comparison, then? I am curious what world-shaking sage would have steered Callow unfailingly, had you not been at the helm."

"Asking for whoever would have risen not to have lost the second largest city in Callow is hardly unfair," I barked back.

"You turn blind eye to the realities of the time," Akua noted. "Another Named would not have benefitted from your relationship to the highest tiers of Praesi power. They would have been forced to rebel while under hunt of the Calamities, raising essentially the same army that was crushed by your teacher with perhaps a few additions. Likely, they would have needed to rely on help from the Principate to stay afloat, which would have begun the Tenth Crusade with Callow the midst of a bloody civil war instead of when its borders were garrisoned. It would have been a nonentity at the peace table afterwards. Perhaps I would have been slain by such a replacement, perhaps not. It is arguable at best if the resulting body count would not have been superior, and beyond debate that the destruction would have been more widespread. The Courts of the Fair Folk would then have found that deeply divided and damaged land much easier to make sport of than it was under your aegis, however flawed."

"You don't know any of that," I said. "It's speculation."

"Which does not seem to be of import, when you castigate yourself," the shade said. "Your usual hypocrisies leave a better taste in the mouth. You are not even alone in those, truth be told. The First Prince calls you a warlord, though she herself rose through war to the throne through the same means.

Levant was warring against the Principate not even two years ago, and Ashur was happily trading with the Wasteland but months before the Tenth Crusade was declared. I am indifferent to the moralities of this, admittedly, but they seem to matter to you and it rather beggars belief that all these rivals must now be considered righteous merely because they march against you."

"I'm not saying they deserve to win any of this," I got out through gritted teeth. "I'm saying it's self-defeating to fight them for the kingdom's sake if the price of that fight is to break the fucking kingdom."

"The Kingdom of Callow is already broken," Akua frankly said. "You've succeeded at keeping it from falling apart entirely after evicting Praes, which is already impressive. Catherine, four years ago there *was* no kingdom. There were only the provinces, ruled by the edicts of the Carrion Lord. In that span, your pried your homeland out of the Empress' grip with minimal destruction and forced a semblance of order onto a realm that was under occupation for several decades. All the while fending off repeated interventions from the two largest nations on the surface of Calernia. This strange expectation you have that anyone, including you, taking up the crown would lead to miracles is rather naïve. Nation-building is not the stuff of months, my dear, which is more or less what you managed to wrest away from more powerful and experienced rulers trying to deny you even that."

"So I'm the lesser evil," I bitterly smiled. "There's a familiar tune. Been a while since it last managed to lull me to pleasant sleep."

"It is most easy to fall short of a paragon of victory existing only in your thoughts," Diabolist said. "You speak as if you believe you somehow hoodwinked an entire kingdom into following you."

"I didn't exactly ask for opinions before the coronation," I said.

"And yet Callow did not rebel," Akua mused. "The remaining highborn and your officials obey your orders. You have brought every Named of note in the kingdom into your service and called the guilds, even those calling themselves *dark*, to heel. Your army, which is now for the most part made of your countrymen, followed you into war willingly. You are not a Fairfax, it is true. Also largely irrelevant, as they are all dead. Considering the founder of that dynasty was a mere knight, a Named with a distinguished military record can hardly be considered lesser origin."

"Eleanor Fairfax ascended to the throne by popular acclaim," I flatly denied.

"She was a skilled and charismatic warlord with the power to make a claim on the throne and popular backing to press it," she meaningfully said.

"Also the blessing of the Heavens," I drily said. "I seem to be missing that part."

"Now we argue theology," Akua said. "Can no crown be worthy without affirmation from Above? I've yet to hear of Cordelia Hasenbach receiving this accolade. Strange that it would be required of you alone."

"You're ignoring the part where I'm a villain," I said.

"You have devoured your own Name and taken Winter in its place," she said. "You share foes with Below, perhaps sympathies with some who strive against Above. I have yet to hear you offer a single prayer to my Gods, Catherine. Even if it were so, the hypocrisy here would be a deep one indeed. Where is this outrage when a Tyrant rises in Helike? Stygia pays dues only in brimstone, and Bellerophon is a maddened altar of a city. And yet no crusade darkens their doorstep. A standard upheld only when convenient is no such thing: it is merely a tool."

"It's a pretty song you sing me," I admitted. "That I am not always right, but just enough. That my enemies are no better."

"And yet," Diabolist said, "you believe not a word of it. Why?"

I thinly smiled.

"Because it was what I wanted to hear," I said. "And you're Akua Sahelian."

It was two hours before Mighty Kodrog woke, and we spent every moment of them in silence.

Chapter 56

Knock Knock

> "Best not to think too deeply, lest the dwarves take the thought."
>
> Mercantian saying

The Mighty Kodrog had been granted a blanket to wear as a makeshift skirt, because I was a merciful captor, but that failed to detract from the fact that it still looked mostly dead. It'd tried to get up, after waking, but the old Foundling response of unpleasant-smile-and-knife-to-the-throat had put an end to that real quick. Ivah had joined us without even need for summons, and spent the last few moments conversing in Crepuscular with our latest addition.

"It is done, Queen," the drow said.

Informing it that 'Lately Queen' wasn't actually my title had ended the misunderstanding, though not soon enough Indrani hadn't made it part of her vocabulary.

"It's willing to share all it knows?" I asked, not hiding my surprise.

"That was not what we conversed of," Ivah said, silver eyes blinking. "It is now agreed upon that the Mighty Kodrog is no longer so. It is named Bogdan, ispe of the lowest rung. The Kodrog are no more."

Wait, had they really been talking about this the entire time? Gods, they quibbled about this stuff even more than Praesi did.

"Ispe," I repeated slowly. "Is that higher or lower than rylleh?"

"Lowest of the Mighty, Queen," Ivah said.

Well, the silver in its eyes was full but it was admittedly quite dull. I'd have to remember the terms, or see about getting a more comprehensive list at some point. Feeling my way up the Everdark's ladder one corpse at a time might take a while.

"Fine," I said. "Then ask our friend Bogdan about the dwarves. What does he know?"

Ivah spoke to the other in that strange, fluid tongue of theirs. It was hard to read tone in Crepuscular – I suspected even loud imprecations would just roll off the tongue like honey – but Bogdan's body language was less difficult

to get a feel of. It looked wary, but also less than worried. Was it under the impression it could kill us all and escape if it wanted to? My knife was no longer at its throat, but I could bury a few inches of steel into its throat before it blinked. I'd gotten used to my reputation helping things along, I mused, but it didn't mean much down here.

"Bogdan requires the clothes of another and its pick of weapons before entertaining such exchange," Ivah finally translated.

I eyed the Mighty Bogdan skeptically. It was kind of impressive it could look this self-assured a full step into the grave, but my patience had limits. I flicked a glance at Ivah.

"Ask it if it enjoys having all ten fingers," I calmly said. "And remind it doesn't need any of those to answer my questions."

The drow slowly nodded, and passed that along. Bodgan's lips quirked at an angle impossible in a human, as if its cheeks muscles were entirely different from ours. It replied softly.

"Bogdan says all you attempt to inflict to them will be returned tenfold," Ivah said.

"Will it now?" I mused.

It was quicker than I'd thought. Bogdan had seen me set my knife back into Pickler's clever little contraption, and it reached directly for the hidden sheath. It was not quite quick enough I didn't catch its wrist, though, and it was all downhill from there. There was no need for a brawl: I just *squeezed* and the bones broke. The drow paled in pain and tried to roll away, but I put a thumb on its collarbone and pressed. The sickening crack that followed was almost drowned out by its scream. Almost. I dropped it back onto the ground.

"Ivah," I mildly said. "Inform Bogdan that if I actually exerted myself, I could punch through its ribcage and spine without so much as scuffing my knuckles. Once that's been established, tell our friend it has ten heartbeats to give me a reason not to do that. I'll begin the count the moment you're done translating."

My guide flinched and hurriedly spoke.

"One," I said.

Bogdan, eyes clouded with pain, looked at Ivah and then back to me.

"Two," I said.

Ah, fear. There was a familiar scent. The drow spoke urgently at my translator.

"Bogdan is now willing to speak," Ivah drily said.

"Its wisdom truly has no bounds," I replied just as drily. "Ask about the dwarves."

Back and forth they went, my guide going through what I presumed from the length to be a comprehensive gauntlet of questions. Ivah suddenly looked surprised, then spat to the side. It turned a trouble look towards me.

"None who were Kodrog remain," it said. "The nerezim were many, and armed for war. They moved with slaughter for their purpose."

"How many?" I asked. "Hundreds, thousands?"

"Bogdan knows not the whole number," Ivah said. "Yet more than five thousand struck those who were Kodrog, and before that ruin came there was word that the Solya and the Mogrel were struck."

My eyes narrowed.

"In sequence?" I said. "Or simultaneously?"

Ivah questioned the prisoner, receiving one word for answer.

"Same time," it replied.

"Those two names you said were sigils as well?" I said.

"That is so," Ivah agreed.

"Stronger or weaker than the Kodrog?"

My translator shrugged.

"Not much weaker or stronger," it said. "The outer rings do not often spawn greatness."

Assuming the dwarves had used the same amount of soldiers for each sigil, and that the force that'd hit the Kodrog was not the same as either of the other two, that meant around fifteen thousand dwarves. *Shit*. Archer was right, that didn't sound like an expedition gone through the Gloom to empty a few mine shafts of precious metals and gems.

"Does it know why the dwarves came?" I frowned.

"The nerezim do not give reason," Ivah delicately said. "Snake does not reason with mouse."

I sighed. Yeah, a monologue neatly informing me of why there was a dwarven army marching into the depths of the Everdark had been a little too much to hope for. Still, they could have dropped a smug yet cryptic hint at least. Was that really too much to ask for?

"Does it know where they were headed, at least?" I said.

Back and forth, one that lasted longer than I'd anticipated. Bogdan might actually be of some real use then.

"Before Mighty Kodrog fled," Ivah said, "it found that the nerezim were headed north. And while in flight, found tracks of others that did the same."

"Towards the cities," I said. "And the inner ring."

My translator nodded silently. I drummed my fingers against my tigh. It could be what they were after was in a ruined city, or even the inner ring, and that was why they'd come with such a large host. The opposition would be stronger and entrenched, further in. But what could possibly be worth enough that sending at least fifteen thousand soldiers into this mess became warranted? That was too large an army for simple wealth, even if there was an old treasury buried somewhere. Artefacts, maybe? It was an open secret that dwarves stole those, let a few decades pass and traded them back to the surface as 'wonders of dwarven blacksmithing' after having slapped a fresh coat of paint over them. Still, fielding an army this side wasn't cheap. I knew that *painfully* well. It would have to be a massively useful or precious artefact. Not impossible, and it might even be that the pit of snakes that was drow society

had regressed enough it no longer knew how to use said artefact – which would make it even more tempting a prize.

That was worrying. Anything worth sending an army for would be dangerous even in the hands of a bumbler, and the dwarves were hardly that.

"Ivah," I said. "Do you know of anything important close to the north? Old ruins, or a holy site?"

"The closest city is Great Lotow," the drow replied. "Beyond it the Hallian ways lead to Great Strycht and Great Mokosh."

That gave me nothing. I knew one of those names, from – wait, *Mokosh*?

"Great Mokosh," I said quietly. "That's where you got your feathers, isn't it?"

"That is so," Ivah said.

"And you mentioned the sigil there was granted by the Sve of Night itself," I slowly continued. "Is there a passage between it and Holy Tvarigu?"

"It is rumoured," my guide admitted. "Yet none but the Sukkla know for certain, and they speak not of this."

I might be going too deep with this one, since I doubted even fifteen thousand dwarves would be able to get to the Priestess of Night, much less killer. But there was a simpler explanation. Ivah had implied, when we'd spoken of it, that dwarven incursions were infrequent and tended to keep to the outskirts. Odds were that the method to pierce through the Gloom either required time to take place, or a non-negligible amount of resources to implement. Maybe it was wasn't *an* artefact they were after. How much easier for the Kingdom Under would it be to take regulars bites out of the drow, if they had enough feathers to equip an entire army?

"How many feathers are there in Mokosh?" I said. "Is the number a secret?"

Ivah shook its head.

"It is holy duty, known to all," it said. "At all times a thousand coats must exist, every one taken to the Burning Lands replaced. Never more or less."

I frowned. Well, a thousand wasn't nothing. And they could use them repeatedly, or try to make artefacts of their own that replicated the effect. But my theory had taken a blow there, no two ways about it. It could be a long-term investment, I told myself. Or I could be missing key information.

"Does our friend Bogdan have anything else to say?" I finally asked.

Ivah asked, and there was a quick exchange. My translator came out of it looking conflicted, and smelling slightly of fear.

"Mighty Bogdan offers to serve as your guide in my place, after harvesting the Night from my corpse," it said.

"How kind of it," I replied, rolling my eyes. "There's no need to be afraid, Ivah. We made a deal and I intend to uphold it."

"Your kindness is great," it replied, bowing its head.

The fear was not wafting as strong, though it'd not disappeared entirely. Drow had trust issues that would make even Praesi raise an eyebrow. I rose to my feet, dusted off my shoulders. I'd come out of this with more questions

than answers, but at least there'd been measurable progress. Hopefully Indrani would find something shedding light on this mess, though I wouldn't count on it. It seemed likely we'd have to head deeper into the tunnels blind to the designs at play. The dwarves would likely clear the way, which was a mixed blessing. It'd limit the fighting, but I couldn't ally with corpses. It was starting to look like my best bet was to head to Tvarigu, where the Priestess of Night would be waiting. If I could have stolen an army's worth of drow without ever shaking hands with that particular devil I would have preferred it, but choices were running even thinner than usual.

"Inform Bogdan it is to behave itself," I told Ivah. "If not, I have no qualms in doling out discipline as harsh as the situation requires. Diabolist will have a look at the broken bones, but I'm not inclined to offer too much comfort after that little interlude of ours."

The drow bowed once more, and I left it to speak with the creature that had once been Mighty Kodrog. Gods, so many names and changing too quickly. That was going to be a pain to commit to memory. I'd have to go through Archer's stuff and see if she had parchment and ink, it might help to make a bloody list. I had the time to kill anyway, we weren't going anywhere until she returned. Two hour later, she did. To my surprise, she emerged from the same passage that had first led us into this cavern.

The surprises that followed were a lot less pleasant.

—

Archer looked exhausted, more than I ever remembered seeing her. She claimed a waterskin after dropping down on a vaguely flat stone, another surprising turn. She'd yet to run out of booze, after all. Scarf hanging loosely around her neck, she dropped her sweat-soaked leather coat to the side and fanned herself vigorously enough she could only be making the heat worse.

"Had to run," she got out.

I blinked in surprise. The tunnels had so far varied between cool and outright cold. It'd take quite a bit to get her this sweaty.

"How long have you been running?" I said.

"At least an hour," she grunted. "And we'll need to get a move on too."

"You found something," Akua said.

"There's that famous Sahelian cleverness," Indrani replied. "Sharp eyes you got there. Or, well, soul bits that look like them. I'm still unclear on the fundamentals of what you are, Wasteland Waste."

"Even Masego was pretty vague," I said. "You sound like an hourglass just got flipped, Indrani. What did you find?"

She ceased drinking just long enough to pour the liquid all over head sweat-drenched hair, sighing in pleasure.

"Right," she said, wiping her eyes clear, "So I've got good news and bad news."

"Let's start with the good news, for once," I tried.

"The good news is that there's only one bit of bad news," she replied with a winning smile.

Akua closed her eyes, looking physically pained.

"I cannot believe I fell for that," she muttered.

"What's the bad news, Archer?" I sighed.

"I went looking for the dwarves ahead," she said. "Didn't run into them, but I found clearer tracks in one of the taverns. It's not hundreds, Cat, I'd say they're numbering between four and five thousand."

"Our friend from earlier said as much," I told her. "And mentioned than another two sigils got hit around the same time. I'm considering them a conservative fifteen, at the moment."

"Shit," Indrani said, scattering her wet hair. "Yeah, that makes sense considering what I found. So the thing was, I came across a tunnel going back towards the Gloom and it had a fresh trail on it. Oil spill, still wet."

"So you followed it," I said. "You came back same way we came in."

"That wasn't where the tunnel led," she grimly replied. "Went straight through another slaughterhouse, only this one had been cleaned up. Neat piles of dead to the sides. Couldn't figure out why until I went back all the way to the Gloom."

"More are crossing," Diabolist quietly said.

"You might say that," Indrani grunted. "Interesting aside, if you were wondering how they go through the Gloom? Lamps, ladies. They're going through in massive caravans carrying hundreds of them, like a giant snake of light. Pretty sure that's where the oil was from, someone must have spilled some."

"You got close," I said, and it wasn't a question.

"Stone's throw," she admitted. "Legged it when they started getting suspicious, but then I came across another crossing."

My fingers clenched.

"How many?"

"I found six," Indrani said. "But that was maybe an hour's length of distance, walking quiet. There could be hundreds for all I know."

"You think this is an invasion," I said.

"I think the nice little corpse piles we keep finding were the vanguard's work," she said. "And now that a foothold's been secured, the real army is coming through."

"And that army's marching towards us as we speak," I finished.

Well... fuck seemed to mild a curse, for once. Assuming all three forces I was also assuming were five thousand each had crossed on a single caravan each, just the six Indrani had come across would mean thirty thousand.

"The lamps you saw," Akua said. "What did the light look like?"

"Not like a candle," Indrani said. "Sunlight, maybe? Whatever it was it felt warm as the literal Hells and I would know – I've visited a few on training trips. Didn't work every time, though. One of the lamps further in went dark

just before I left a place, and what must have been thousands in the distance just... vanished. The dwarves weren't happy about that."

I wished I could say I was surprised Ranger had taken her pupils into the Hells just to blood them, but it would have been a lie. She'd done it with Arcadia, after all, and it was about as dangerous a place even when invited.

"A detail of great importance, this," Diabolist said. "The Gloom seems to have properties related to the night, and so therefore the classical element of the sun would be a natural foe."

Wait, the godsdamned sun was a – yeah, next time I saw Masego I was definitely asking him for a list.

"This will be the result of an enchantment," Akua continued. "And if it is meant to last an entire crossing uninterrupted, the materials will have to be symbolically linked to the concept. Brightwood would serve well, but deteriorate too quickly. And is exceedingly rare besides. I would hazard a guess that the frame of the lamps was gold?

"Wow, Akua," Indrani drawled. "You sure did answer that question no one was asking like a champion. You truly are the bag of uselessness that keeps on giving."

"No," I said. "This is actually important, Archer. I know the dwarves are the richest nation on Calernia, but even they have limits on how much gold they can just whip out. You said the other material would deteriorate, Akua. The gold too?"

"More slowly," she replied. "A few days, if the enchantments were laid very carefully. It should allow for a passage through the Gloom."

"But not a return trip," I said.

"Not unless the fuel itself is inherently magical-"

"Which would make this the single most expensive invasion in the history of Calernia," I noted. "Though it might very well be regardless."

"-and that would add large costs to an already costly device," Akua finished, sounding mildly irritated by my interruption. "The lamps would be extremely delicate work, the slightest mistake or corruption making them useless. They would need to be constructed in a specialized workshop, preferably in a magically neutral environment. Neither repairs nor making of fresh replacements should be possible on this side of the Gloom."

"Still not seeing why this matters, even if you're right," Indrani said, ruffling her scarf.

"Because even lesser artefacts don't grow on trees," I said. "Particularly if they need *gold* to work. They have to have a limited quantity of those to draw from, and you said one of the tunnels went dark anyway. There's risks of failure too. If it was that easy to mount an invasion they would have done it ages ago. This is a massive investment of resources, probably prepared over decades. They'll have had to make a choice."

"A larger number of troops to get across," Akua said, completing my thought, "or setting aside lamps to maintain supply lines."

"Keeping the lines open means leaving soldiers behind to guard them," I said. "Who need rations too, and the broader the area to guard the more mouths there'd be to feed and the more soldiers taken from the main force. And let's assume the crossing fails... one time out of ten, which seems on the low end to me. The price escalates the longer they keep at this. It'd be more practical so send one large army through with their own supplies, then let them live off the land until they got what they came for."

"They sent the vanguard to clear the way, so the larger army can advance without wasting time on petty skirmishes," Indrani guessed.

"The sigils of the region were exterminated quite thoroughly," Diabolist noted. "Suppressing word of the invasion was likely an objective as well. It would allow the dwarves to penetrate deep into the Everdark before organized resistance is mounted."

"This is going to be a shitshow," Archer grimaced. "Living off the land *here*? There's barely enough for the drow to live on. Even if they manage to keep the ranks fed while they fight out there, they'll have to march back through a place they stripped clean then risk the crossings again."

"Did you see any of them carrying unlit lamps across?" Akua softly asked.

Indrani's eyes narrowed. She shook her head. My fingers clenched.

"They don't intend to leave," I said, voicing everyone's thoughts. "The army's here to destroy whatever causes the Gloom, and then the rest of the Kingdom Under comes through to take the Everdark."

And there we were, between the vanguard and the army. Well, I'd come here expecting a magical journey and I had certainly gotten one.

Curses were magic too.

Chapter 57

Betwixt

"Come now, my lords, you started this war knowing what I'm about."

Dread Empress Massacre the First

It was too large for a pond but much too small for a lake. A reservoir? Nah, I was pretty sure that implied spadework, which this clearly didn't have. Pool, maybe. Regardless, it was a source of unsullied freshwater and it'd been almost a day since we'd run into one of those. Tactically redeploying in the opposite direction of an incoming army was thirsty work and the drow weren't nearly as enduring as the rest of us, so it was probably time for a break. We'd need a bit to refill the skins, anyway, and if there was some kind of edible creature in there it'd be a nice change of pace from our increasingly stale rations. Indrani had taken to pouring brandy on hers, though in all honesty I wasn't sure whether the taste was the actual reason for that.

"Half hour," I called out, withdrawing the finger's I'd been dipping into the waters. "Ivah, tell your fellows they're responsible for rationing their water as well as filling the skins. They're not dipping in ours a second time no matter how thirsty they get."

I could make ice and let it melt into drinking water, sure, but at the moment we were keeping a low profile. I wasn't sure whether the dwarves had some sort of device that would allow them to sense sorcery, but if they did I was pretty sure using Winter to any great extent would be like lighting a brightstick in a dark room. My mantle could do subtle, theoretically speaking, but it'd never been a specialty of mine and I wasn't willing to gamble our remaining hidden on it. My guide nodded and addressed the rest of its kind in an even tone. Ever since the former Mighty Kodrog had been disciplined and I'd declined to let anyone harvest its Night and serve as a replacement guide, Ivah had gotten much more self-assured.

Akua had voiced opinion that since it'd functioned as a lieutenant to a violent and unpredictable entity for decades, it was falling back on those habits now that it was under my protection. Bogdan wasn't too happy about that, but

I'd ordered Diabolist to get the broken bones patched up and nothing more. The message had been received, from the way it was now behaving much more carefully. I got up from my crouch and sighed. Our pace was being slowed down by the drow more than I'd like, but there was little I could do about it and leaving them behind wasn't on the table. If they weren't in my custody, they'd be in that of the dwarves. Indrani was at my side a heartbeat later, footsteps so soft I'd barely heard them.

"They're getting near the end of their rope," she observed. "Might want to give them a full hour instead, stretch out the last gasps."

"We're already crawling at a snail's pace," I grunted back. "You've said it yourself, we're probably a little more than a day ahead of the dwarven army."

"Guesswork," Indrani reminded me.

"Guesswork based on the messengers you've seen going back and forth," I replied. "We're not swinging in the dark here."

She opened her mouth, but I raised my hand.

"If what passes your lips is a pun, Archer, I will drown you myself," I threatened.

There was a pause.

"Fill my skins," she offered, sounding very casual. "I'll take a look ahead, see if I can rustle up anything."

"Ivah says we're nearing the edge of the outer rings," I told her. "If the vanguard is going to dig in and wait for reinforcements, it'll be soon. The odds of running into the army have significantly increased."

"If they dig in, it's our opportunity to go around them," Indrani countered. "Best we know as soon as possible and plan accordingly."

I mulled over that. She had a point. Half the reason she wanted to go for a wander was likely that she was starting to feel like she had a leash around her neck – I'd asked her to cut back how far she went on her exploratory trips – but she was right on the nose about the vanguard digging in. My bet, at the moment, was that when they got close to the first strong drow position they'd set up and wait for proper assault troops. If we went around them while their eyes were on the local sigil, there were decent odds we could make it through without getting noticed.

"Do it," I finally said, taking the mostly empty water skin in her hands. "As usual-"

"Tread lightly, steel stays in the sheath," she finished, rolling her eyes. "At this rate you're going to get that tattooed on my arse."

"I assumed something deeply tasteless was already taking up the space," I replied without missing a beat.

"Hey, my arse is extremely tasteful," she protested.

"You're confusing words again," I airily said. "What you're looking for is *tawdry*."

She flipped me off, I mimed drowning her in the pool and with the traditional rites complete we parted ways. I watched her saunter away, though

with the leather coat on there wasn't much to look at, and absent-mindedly tossed up the skin before snatching it out of the air. The drow were going about their business visibly exhausted, and to my quiet amusement Mighty Bogdan seemed to have no earthly idea how to fill up a skin. I was too entertained by its struggles to seriously consider offering help. Akua was kneeling by the pool as well, though her skin – which she didn't need, or use – was full. She was staring at the far wall, unmoving. A few steps took me to her side, and in a blatant abused of my queenly prerogatives I threw Archer's skin at her shoulder.

"There," I said. "Since you seem in need of something to keep your hands busy."

The shade picked up the leathery folds between two fingers, somehow managing a full monologue's worth of disdain without speaking a word.

"It smells like aragh," she said.

"So does Archer, half the time," I shrugged. "What deep thoughts did I take you away from, Diabolist?"

"I was pondering," she said, "the nature of this invasion."

"The term is usually pretty self-explanatory," I noted, only half-serious.

"Context, Catherine," she chided. "This was a significant investment of resources, even for the Kingdom Under. The kind that would have to be prepared over the span of decades, requiring specialized labour otherwise in high demand and significant preparations of logistics."

"And you're wondering why they'd bother, given that the Everdark is a mess of collapsing tunnels filled with violent lunatics," I said. "I mean, there's the obvious answer. Drow don't mine much, as far as we can tell. Lots of wealth to claim once they take over the place."

"Over time, the investment made could be recovered tenfold," Akua agreed. "Yet we both know that kind of long term planning in the highest reaches of a nation is a rarity. The expense would have to be justified in the face of more immediate uses for that coin giving more obvious benefit."

"It's rare on the surface," I said. "Where sinking that much of your treasury into anything makes you weak elsewhere and your rivals will take advantage of it. What rivals do they have left, down here? They can afford to take the long view. Hells, they *live* longer than humans too. This could just be the life's work of some highly influential dwarf."

How long dwarves actually lived remained a matter of bitter and divisive scholarly debate, a matter not helped by the fact that their kind lied profusely about the matter whenever they ventured to the surface. Theories ranged from a few hundred years to a couple thousand, though most scholars agreed it was under five hundred. Considering people weren't even sure how dwarves reproduced, lifespan uncertainty was no surprise.

"And yet the invasion only takes place now," Diabolist said.

I could have replied that there was precedent for the Kingdom Under evicting other underground nations to the surface largely out of principle – the goblins were testament to that – but that would rather be missing the point,

wouldn't it? Dates for the goblin exodus were vague, since the Tribes rarely gave straight answers to anything unless there was a blade at their throat, but it was a fact it preceded the Miezan occupation of Praes. Which meant at least a millennium and a half ago. If the entire point of this was to remove a rival power, however comparatively weak that rival was, then they'd taken quite a while to get around to finishing the work.

"Might be it was just that one tedious chore they never got around to doing," I mused. "They polished off the rest of the list over the centuries, now they're out of excuses not to massacre the neighbours."

"Overdue spring cleaning," Akua mildly said. "This is your theory for what drives the fate of two nations?"

"You got anything better?" I said.

"Let us assume," the shade said, "that the Everdark's continued sovereignty is the result of dwarven *incapacity* instead of *unwillingness*."

"Which is a wild guess on your part," I said.

"One that aligns with other facts," Diabolist said. "Regardless, it is fact that there was a dwarven contingent on the surface during the Liesse Rebellion."

"Mercenaries," I said. "That's not exactly unheard of. They also took the first bribe offered to leave."

"Because their purpose was not to make war, but to assess the situation," Akua suggested.

"They already do that through Mercantis, supposedly," I said. "Everyone sells information about everyone else in exchange for crumbs about what's happening down here. Why send soldiers?"

"A host of dwarven infantry would represent a significant force," she said. "One which would be worthy of courting by surface powers, as the Carrion Lord did. As the Callowan rebels did, and the First Prince behind them."

My eyes narrowed.

"So you think the point was to gauge how invested all the players were in the rebellion and the wars that would follow it," I said. "They shouldn't *need* to go that far, Akua. Who the Hells would be stupid enough to pick a fight with the Kingdom Under? They'll be selling cheap weapons to at least half the nations involved in any scuffle. There's a reason the Principate can throw massed levies at us without going bankrupt."

"Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return-"

"Forced them to pay tribute, sure," I interrupted, rolling my eyes. "Once, after she flooded a few of their tunnels with demons. Didn't stop them from funding and arming a continent's worth of rebellions against her a few years later, did it? They just threw gold at her so she'd fuck off and then paid for other humans to actually put her down. Let's not pretend it was more than a headache for them."

"That is still precedent for a surface power proving troublesome to dwarven interests," Akua insisted. "A cautious assessment of the situation was therefore

made, yielding the answer that the largest surface powers were preparing for large scale and long term warfare."

"After which they did nothing," I said. "That was years ago, and they're only moving now. I doubt it would take them that long to mobilize."

"Indeed," the shade agreed in a murmur. "They acted only after a much more recent development."

It wasn't the Tenth Crusade. There had, after all, been nine predecessors to it. But if her argument was about a power on the move that usually remained put...

"How would they know about the Dead King?" I frowned. "It's not like he sent them a letter. *We* don't even known how he'll go about participating in the war, and we were guests in Keter not that long ago."

"The Kingdom Under has borders with the Kingdom of the Dead," Akua said.

"Which are, famously, tunnels they drowned in lava and molten metal until there was nothing left moving," I said.

"Your argument is that the preeminent power on Calernia has no way to observe the going-ons at its most dangerous border," Akua mildly said.

I grimaced. Yeah, fair point.

"So they see him pull back his undead for a push on the surface," I mused, following the thread. "And take that as an open invitation to march on the Everdark. Why? That's still thin, Akua. If they're that worried about the Dead King, why take the risk at all? It's not like the drow are a threat to them."

"So I wondered," Diabolist admitted. "If neither wealth nor pride are the reason, then why? It cannot be room for expansion, they could simply layer deeper. Such a large undertaking could hardly be made without sanction from the highest powerbrokers of dwarven authority. That implies, to me, a strategic motive."

"Hard to guess at those when no one knows their exact borders," I said.

She nodded in agreement. I narrowed my eyes at her.

"But you have a theory anyway," I said.

"After your distant kin settled in what is now the Duchy of Daoine," she said, "the largest threat to them was greenskin raids. Yet they did not strike directly at the clans, instead raising the Wall. Why?"

Because only an idiot would try to take the Steppes. The Miezans had done it, sure, but they'd had a whole arsenal of advantages no one on Calernia could boast of having and there'd actually been orc cities to target back then. Which wa no longer the case: even after the Reforms, the Clans had remained nomadic. Rulers of Daoine could and had cleared out belligerent clans near the Greenskin Marches but there'd never been a serious effort to conquer the Steppes. The orcs would just retreat deeper in and the Deoraithe armies would have to settle in for winter in hip-deep snow with nothing to live off of and a *lot* of angry orcs on the prowl. *Which*, I thought*, is Akua's point*.

"Containment," I slowly said. "Ratlings don't lair deep, so they'd have a free hand under the Chain of Hunger. You think they know they can't take the Dead King, so they're trying to bottle him up instead. And for the encirclement to be complete the drow need to go."

"Should any significant drow presence remain in the region, the fortresses maintaining that encirclement would suffer sporadic assault," Akua said. "To make the sealing easily sustainable-"

"They need the drow gone," I quietly said. "Dead or far, far away."

We filled our skins in silence, after that. It was a fragile house of cards that she'd built one sentence at a time, and all it'd take for it to crumple was a single assumption proved false. But it sounded like a distinct possibility. That was always the problem, with Akua. She was a skilled speaker, one that could spin a decent story out of nearly anything given long enough. *But if she's right...* Either the drow drove back the dwarves – and reckless as I was, I wouldn't t put gold on that – or there'd be a an entire race of vagrants needing greener pastures to move to.

That, I thought, sounded like an opportunity to me.

—

Archer had returned without any fanfare, before the hour of rest she'd talked me into was even over. We stood to the side of the others, speaking quietly in tongues they would not know.

"This place is about to be a war zone, Cat." Indrani said.

"You found the dwarven vanguard, then," I guessed.

She brushed back her hair, lashes fluttering over hazelnut eyes as she did. Her longcoat was open, revealing the silvery mail beneath, but she wore the metal as nonchalantly as if it were cloth.

"Part of it, anyway," she confirmed. "If there used to be three forces of five thousand like you guessed, that's no longer the case. There were at least eight thousand preparing to give battle."

"That's too large a force of a single cavern," I said.

"Not if it's a huge godsdamned cavern," Indrani snorted. "It's at least the size of Laure. There were a bunch of lichen and mushroom farms down there, I think it might have been some kind of food centre. Water too, the largest body we've come across so far."

"I was under the impression we were still a few days away from the closest city," I said.

""Dunno about a city, but there were a pack of drow there for sure," she said. "Cavern's a drop from our current height – the dwarves found another way down, I must have missed it – and near the back there's some sort of massive stalagmite melding into the wall that the locals carved into."

"Walls?" I asked.

"Nah, nothing like that," Indrani replied, shaking her head. "It's like some sort of spiral ramp going up. Pretty sure it's flat at the top, but my vantage

points was sloppy. The whole thing might be hollow, for all I know. There were tents going all the way to the top."

"That's defensible against even heavy infantry," I said. "If the ramps are narrow enough."

"Our short friends were setting up a bunch of weird siege engines," she said. "Infantry's not all the drow are up against."

Eight thousand, huh. That was more than half of what I currently believed the dwarven vanguard to number, which was promising but still meant seven thousand should be traipsing around the tunnels unaccounted for. Fighting underground like this would be different from the kind of wars I was familiar with. With tunnels it would be much easier to defend than attack, as a rule, particularly if the defender had powerful champions capable of holding a narrow area against superior numbers. On the other hand, without an open field flanking operations became a very different kind of enterprise. No plains down here, no way to see an enemy detachment until they were right on top of you. If I were the dwarves, I'd station hardened troops on the flanks to keep an eye out while I was moving against a fortified drow position. Assuming high-ranking Mighty were as dangerous as even just green Named bent towards combat, a single one slipping through defensive lines was enough to make a costly mess. I chewed on my lip thoughtfully.

"I don't suppose you took a look at the adjacent tunnels?" I asked.

"Not in depth," Indrani said. "Glanced down a few, though, and I got the impression most of them curve towards the large cavern."

A chokepoint? It'd explain while the dwarves were willing to slow their advance to take it. Ivah's knowledge of the region was sadly limited, as it'd only crossed it the once and under the understanding it was to move towards the Gloom as quickly as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if the Kingdom Under had maps, though, and good ones. It was tempting to try to get my hands on one even with the risks inherent to crossing dwarvenkind.

"They're going to have the flanking tunnels under guard," I finally said. "So far they've been careful to allow no runners. They'll have the entire place sealed up."

"That's my guess," Indrani agreed. "So what's the plan, Your Queenlyness? We trying to shimmy through while they're busy under a touch of the ol' glamour?"

"We still don't know if they can pick up on my using Winter," I said.

"We *do* know they have eyes, Cat," she replied. "I'm not fancying our chances of sneaking through a dwarven blockade without a little fae juice to help things along, and you know we can't wait this out. The real army's not far behind."

I hummed, not disagreeing or agreeing.

"So we have to place a bet," I said. "If you were a dwarf and you had devices that could pick up on sneaks – a pretty basic precaution, given who you're invading – where would you put them? With the main force, or the flankers?"

"If I were a dwarf, I'd be massively rich and drunk all the time with a city's worth of naked servants catering to my every twisted need," Indrani mused.

"If you were a dwarf, but not a complete waste of a person," I tried. "I know you don't have a lot of experience with that, but use your imagination."

She half-heartedly gestured for me to go hang myself.

"Would make sense for the shortstacks to keep the trinkets on the sides," she finally said. "The stalagmite's pretty fucking surrounded. But that's assuming they don't have enough devices to have them everywhere. And that they have those at all."

"If they do have them everywhere, we're screwed anyway," I noted. "Best we can do is play the odds assuming they don't."

"So you want to take a stroll through an active battlefield," Indrani snorted. "With a pack of unruly drow, a self-absorbed spectre and yours truly. That's not one of our better plans, Cat, and that should not be a hard hill to climb given how we got into Skade."

"Worked, didn't it?" I said. "We played to our strengths-"

"Blatant lies," she helpfully provided.

"- and their weaknesses," I finished.

"Expecting sense of us?" she suggested.

"Unorthodox approaches," I righteously corrected. "It'll be dangerous, I don't deny that, but then so is every other option on the table. I think this is the least stupid risk we can take. Unless you happen to have a better idea?"

"Aside from digging our own way through, not really," Indrani mused. "And we'd need Winter for that anyway. Shovels alone wouldn't cut it, and since Vivi left we don't even have those anymore."

I sighed and passed a hand through my hair.

"Well, let's get moving then," I said. "If this was a mistake, best to know it today."

"Hey, look on the bright side," she smiled. "If this is a horrible blunder that's going to get all of us killed, then at least I won't survive to give you shit about it."

There was a silver lining, I mused. Shame it was on a cloud raining fire and brimstone, but that was life for you wasn't it? Sometimes you just had to put on your good boots, bring out your sword and kill your way to the top of the flying fortress before you got to see daylight.

The last few years of my existence would have been a lot more pleasant if that were actually a metaphor.

Chapter 58

Quiet

> "May the Heavens strike me down if I lie. Again."
>
> Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

No one in living memory had seen a dwarven army take the field, not on the surface anyway. Even with all the dangers swirling around us I'd been looking forward to that part. Since becoming the Squire I'd scrapped either with or to the side of most the famous militaries: the Legions of Terror, the Spears of Stygia, Helikean exiles, both fae Courts. My own people in rebellion, Akua's host of old breed Praesi. The Tenth Crusade too, though in all fairness I'd seen neither hide nor hair of soldiers that weren't Proceran in the northern campaign. There was little left to account for. The other cities of the League were hardly known for their soldiery – apparently Bellerophon didn't even have career officers, which just boggled the mind – and Ashur was primarily a naval power. The Dead King and the Chain of Hunger were the last two contenders, since the elves didn't really fight wars. I'd be facing the former sooner or later, and the latter was allegedly more horde than host. With the drow having proved to be a pack of squabbling assholes bleeding themselves over the right to be Creation's ricketiest demigods, the only force of note that remained was the Kingdom Under. Juniper, I thought, would have given her right hand to stand in my shoes right at this moment.

Indrani had led us to the same perch she'd used on earlier trip, and for all that it felt overly exposed it did give us a perfect view of what took place below. She hadn't been overselling the size of the cavern, I quickly found out. Large as Laure might, if anything, be an understatement. There were a lot more people in Callow's capital, of course. Maybe half the cavern was taken up by a lake, which to my mild interest revealed itself to be another food source for the locals. There were fish farms, walled in with stones, and what I was pretty sure was crab traps though the creatures writhing inside didn't look like any crab I'd seen before. Most of the rest was 'farmland'. Raised stones covered with thick lichen, mushrooms patches and what looked like some strange cousin of

potatoes wherever the dirt was thick enough. Most of that was now occupied by the dwarven vanguard. The only drow holdout was the massive stalagmite in the back that Indrani had mentioned, though she hadn't done the sight of it justice with her short description.

At the base, it was about as thick as fortress. Archer had labelled the path up as a spiral, but the angle was too sharp for the term to really fit. It zigzagged across the sides of the stalagmite with precision too defined to be anything but manmade, the parts of the path that passed between the stone spire and the wall of the cavern effectively tunnels. There'd been tents there before, but they'd been flattened or taken away by the drow awaiting the assault. Which was coming soon, there were no two ways about it. I could tell as much just by the way the army had been positioned. At the bottom of the stalagmite a force of three thousand was standing patiently, and I'd almost let out a whistle at my first good look. Dwarves were known for their heavy infantry as well as their lethal contraptions, but these soldiers went a step further than I'd expected. It was like looking at walking barrels of steel. It was plate, in the sense that their armour wasn't mail, but layered so thickly no a spot of dwarf could be seen underneath. Not even the famous beards: the helmets bore face-covering masks that ended in a sculpted steel beard where I assumed their actual beards lay protected. The weight of that should be too heavy for even the famously physically strong dwarves to be able to move in, so while there were no runes to be seen on the surface I assumed some had been inscribed beneath. To a dwarf, they bore long halberds with steel shafts that weighed enough even Hakram would have difficulty swinging one around.

They're weren't infantry so much as a company of walking battering rams.

The five thousand remaining dwarves were less heavily armoured, at least. Three divisions of a thousand each wore ornate but otherwise unremarkable plate, with square shields and war hammers. They all had crossbows on their back. I was classifying them as regulars in my mind, though in anyone else's army they would be heavies. The last thousand was... interesting. The most lightly armoured of the lot, with only steel cuirasses over leather and plumed helmets that left the faces bare. They attended to the three dozen war machines the vanguard had set up in a crescent facing the stalagmite. If Juniper would have given a hand to see the battle, then Pickler would have eaten her firstborn to get a good peek at those. About half the machines looked to be some kind of fat steel ballistas raised on wheeled platforms. Not even the rope was, well, rope. It looked to be some kind of woven metal chord. There were wagons full of spherical projectiles next to them, two per ballista. The remaining half of the engines was hard to classify. The basic shape was like an onager's, more or less small and portable catapults. What a scorpion was to a ballista, though my sappers would string me up for making so broad a comparison. The similarity ended at the shape, though. The steel base had been nailed to the floor with spikes almost as large as the engine itself, and instead of spheres to throw the already-loaded projectiles looked like elongated battering rams in a metal I did

not recognize.

I wasn't sure what those were meant for, but I doubted the drow would enjoy it.

The last of the dwarves were maybe two hundred, including what I was pretty sure was their command staff. Their armour was closest to that of the regulars, but lined with enough precious stones to steady Callow's treasury for a good year. Unlike the grunts they were mounted. No horses, though. Best way I could put it was the unholy offspring of a lizard and an insect: the creatures were scaled and their reptilian heads had an impressive set of fangs, but their legs numbered six and were strangely segmented. They had three claws at the end of those, though they looked like they'd been blunted. Those officers were only around four dozen in number, and the remainder was unlike any other troops I'd seen so far. They wore heavy cuirasses and mail beneath them, but no helmet and both hair and beard were almost obsessively braided. Their weapons were not standardized, ranging from greatsword to some kind of chain with spiked weights at the end, but the eye-catching part was the trophies dangling down their bodies. Skulls and claws, stingers and broken weapons. Indrani caught me looking and leaned closer.

"Deed-seekers," she whispered. "Met of few in Refuge. They're after things they're not supposed to get according to other dwarves, so they're trying to earn enough glory that they become worthy of getting them. Some came up to hunt in the Waning Woods. Heard others go through the gate in Levant to have a tussle with the stuff in the woods there."

"They any good?" I whispered back.

"Ran across one who broke his hammer on a manticore's horns so he beat it to death with his bare hands," she said. "And I'm not talking a juvenile, the thing was fully grown. They're pretty hardcore. Polite for dwarves, though. Those I met knew surface tongues and they were willing to pay for guides."

"So crazy of the dangerous kind," I grunted. "Just what we needed."

The conversation ended there and for good reason: the dwarves were on the move. There was no horn, no trumpet or warning. The ballistas just shot their first volley and the battle began. The projectiles, round orbs of steel, smacked into the upper reaches of the stalagmite. They'd been denied a better target: the drow were holing up out of sight. Rock shattered under steel and the whole spire shook. My brow rose at the sight. Those hit a lot harder than anything my goblins had ever cooked up.

"Flushing out the drow, you think?" Indrani said.

"If that stalagmite is solid rock, it'll take them a while to make a dent even with strong engines," I said.

Twenty heartbeats later the second volley hit, hitting the same places with impressive accuracy. The drow remained in hiding, which I honestly couldn't fault them for. Between the crossbows and the siege if they made a stand anywhere in the open they'd get slaughtered. Their best shot was to make the dwarves come to them and hold a narrow passage hidden away from the

engines. Alas for the locals, it was not to be. Three volleys later the entire stalagmite *cracked*. I could see the fracture going through the side, jagged and large enough to be easily visible even from where Indrani and I were laying on the floor. The entire top third of the spire had been cracked, at least on the side facing the dwarves. Had the thing been hollow? Maybe. Still, crack or not the weight of that upper third was keeping it in place. My eyes moved to the second kind of engines, anticipating there would be answer to that. My instincts had been correct. The almost-onagers were being seen to, long steel chains being attached to the back of the ram-like projectiles. The chains led to matching cranked wheels, already nailed into the ground.

"They're going to pull the damned thing down," I murmured. "Gods."

How? Even if they put dwarves to work the crank, they shouldn't be strong enough to apply sufficient pressure. The rams flew and sunk into the stone like a knife through butter, shivering after coming to a rest. There'd been sorcery at work, I thought. Blades unfolding inside to give greater grip? Impossible to tell. Anyhow, my first question got an answer moments later. Only a single dwarf attended to each crank, but the moment they laid hands on them the wheels lit up with runes. Not even thirty heartbeats later, the whole upper third of the spire came toppling down. They'd angled it to it fell into the water instead of on their own troops, though the great splash wet a few of them anyway. My eyes narrowed as I returned my attention to the stalagmite. It *was* hollow. The drow inside were swarming like a hive that'd just gotten kicked. The angle of steel ballistas was adjusted, projectiles from the second wagons loaded, and the volley arced up moments later. The spheres were stone this time, not steel. I did not wait long to learn why: at the summit of their arc, just above the hollow, they burst. Burning rain fell down, reaping a harvest of screams and death.

"Lava," I quietly said. "That was fucking lava."

"I mean, it's not like they're ever going to run out," Indrani mused. "I can see the logic behind it."

"Don't you try to make it sound like it's reasonable to shoot *magic lava stones* at people, Archer," I hissed. "Who even does that?"

"The dwarves, evidently," she said.

Sadly, throttling her might have given away our position so it would have to wait. Our time to move was fast approaching, though. The moment the dwarven infantry engaged we'd be trying our luck at sneaking through. Our exit tunnel had already been picked out, and we had a route across that wouldn't take us too close to the fighting. The drow had been on the defensive so far, but since it'd become clear that the dwarves had no intention to climb up and the alternative was remaining inside a hole that'd slowly get filled with molten rock they were finally coming out. It was the first time I was having a look at a drow force that wasn't already a pile of corpses, so they earned my full attention. *This is not a professional army*, was my first thought. Even Proceran levies had officers and an order of battle, but the drow? This was a tribe of warriors, with not a single soldiers among it. I could make out the hierarchy

by the way they were equipped. No steel to be found on any of them, but there were tiers of a sort. The lowest of the low wore skins and leathers, armed with spears and blades. I winced when I noticed some of those blades were *bone*. That wouldn't even scratch the dwarven armour.

Higher up the ladder, and fewer in number, there were drow in obsidian and stone. The equipment was not uniform, some of them having what I'd consider decent armour while others wore essentially the same as the first batch only with dangling bits of stronger material over it. Their weapons were mostly iron, of passable make. They'd at least manage to leave a mark on the enemy before being slaughtered. The last and rarest were those I assumed to be Mighty. Only a dozen of them, but they stood out starkly from the rest. Garbed in long flowing robes of Night with shifting plaques of iron in it, they moved swift as arrows through the charging crowd. Spears were the only armament they seemed to wield, with what I was pretty sure were sharpened ruby heads. Wasn't sure how that would measure up to steel, though I did remember rubies were supposed to be one of the harder gemstones. The whole muster of the sigil was maybe two thousand. They'd get brutalized when they got to the bottom of the spire and engaged the dwarven heavy infantry, but the dwarves seemed disinclined to allow even that.

One of the mounted officers brought a horn to his lips, the first signal of the battle, and the deep call got the regulars moving. The square shields were set down to cover their bodies, crossbows taken out and the proverbial fish in the barrel got that same proverbial end. It was a relief to see that their firing rate was lesser than that of my legionaries. The range, though, was at least double. I would not want to fight those on an open field. The bolts scythed through the drow as they kept charging down the ramp, though only for the lesser warriors. The rest melded into the shadow-state when they saw the volleys approach. The ballistas had never ceased firing, slowly emptying the wagons of projectiles. Lava kept raining down into the hollow spire. The screams hadn't ended either, and I was fairly sure the only warriors in the cavern were the ones charging to their doom. It would have been interesting to see how Mighty fared against dwarven infantry, but I didn't intend to stick around until the final clean up. Their attention should be on the drow, for now, and that was our way out. I elbowed Archer and gestured towards our back. She nodded and we crawled out of sight before rising. The others were a short ways back, Akua keeping an eye on them.

They'd been waiting on us, and there was little need for conversation when time finally came to move. The plan was fairly simple. Indrani had the rope and hook to allow us to climb down to the floor of the cavern below, and the drow should have no issue managing it. The only thing up in the air was whether or not our friends would pick up on my use of Winter, and there was no real way to know that without trying it. Glamour shouldn't draw as much attention as more direct uses, so it was as calculated a risk as we could take. I returned back to the edge, and with a deep breath allowed Winter to slither through my veins.

I kept it simple, erasing our presence to the senses – I wasn't sure whether the dwarven mounts could smell us at a distance, but I wasn't about to take the risk. The working wasn't too complicated, but it would take concentration to keep it going. The moment it settled, I glanced down at the battle. The dwarves had not stirred, which was promising. I gestured for the others to begin climbing down.

It was a tense half-hour before everyone made it to the cavern floor, shimmying down before Archer tugged back her rope. I'd not been certain whether or not I could keep the glamour going while having to focus on going down the rope, so an alternative solution had been required. The working should take care of the sound, and that was the important part. I glanced down and shrugged. Only thirty feet or so. I'd fallen down worse before. I leapt. Wings would make this much easier, admittedly, but they would require drawing deeper on my mantle. Besides, I mused even as the ground came ever closer, I'd been meaning to find out something. If I could turn myself into outright mist, finer manipulations should be possible as well. I landed on the stone in a crouch, having meddled with my legs, and found mixed results. Strengthening my knees had succeeded at making sure they wouldn't break, which had been my main objective. Sadly, it'd also torn up whatever smoke and mirrors passed for my leg muscles these days. Half a win, I decided, adjusting my cloak where the fall had put it in disarray. The muscles were already reforming. Next time I'd have to see if I could make the entire legs solid without rupturing my insides above them.

The others clustered around me without a word. I'd made it clear that the closest to me they stood, the easiest it was to keep up the glamour. Our way through was still open, thank the Gods. Dwarven forces had been placed to prevent the drow in the spire from escaping, not occupy the whole cavern, which was too large for that regardless. It meant that if we kept close to the wall on the left side, we avoided coming close to the battle. In a strange and silent pilgrimage we tread through moss and mushrooms until we were hugging the wall and began our way through. My control was not fine enough to erase our footsteps, I'd warned them. It took longer to go through while avoiding leaving visible marks on the ground, but there was no other option. I'd never kept a working going this long before, and now I knew why I'd unconsciously avoided it: the longer I did the more I could feel Winter's influence creeping into my mind, even if I was drawing no deeper on my power. Fortunately, Akua was there for me to shunt the influence into. It was almost tenser to stalk through unseen than take part in the fighting, I thought. Battle I knew well, but this? It wasn't my wheelhouse. It took us most an hour to get across, and by then there was not a single living drow left.

I'd not had a good look at the last of the fighting, but the dwarven heavy infantry hadn't been shaken by the doomed charge of the Mighty in the slightest. The regulars had gone up the slope afterwards, into the hollow part, and soon after the screams had gone silent. There'd never been a chance the drow

would win this, and the outer rings were supposed to be the weakest part of the Everdark, but if this was a sign of what was to come... Well, I didn't fancy the chances of the drow as a whole to turn back this invasion. I allowed the thought to fade as we neared our chosen tunnel. Archer hadn't had a chance to take a look inside, but she'd noted it was the most lightly guarded. Ivah had gone through one close to it, on its way to the Gloom, and assured us that after another large abandoned cavern it led into a mess of small paths. Enough that it would be more or less impossible to keep an eye on all of them. It was a detour, taking us to the northeast when the quicker route would have been straight north, but a few additional days were well worth keeping out of sight. I was an old hand at disaster, by now, so my nerves grew more ragged as we neared the exit. If this was going to fail, it was going to fail now.

There were dwarves near the tunnel, but only a small company. Less than a hundred. It was my first time coming this close to their kind, but I did not slow to take a better look. Distractions were the enemy of this not-fight. I did note they were regulars, however. Those in layered armour might not be too common. More importantly, they were dawdling near the tunnel and not blocking the exit. We passed them by, step by step. I felt a dim spike of fear when a pair began talking loudly in some dwarven tongue, but they began brawling not long after and I let out a relieved breath. My shoulders loosened as we left them behind, allowing myself a strangled laugh. I wasn't a fool, of course. I wouldn't drop the glamour until we were much further in. But it looked like – no, I wasn't going to finish that fucking thought. *Never count the chickens, Catherine, even when they're hatched. The Gods will shove them back in the fucking eggs just to spite you.* Being absolutely still in the middle of the metaphorical woods, we pressed on. Archer took the lead, Ivah at her side, and they took us through a handful of short passages in quick succession. It was maybe another quarter hour until we reached the large cavern Ivah had mentioned.

Abandoned was something of a misnomer, as it was currently full of dwarves. Slightly more problematic was the way my glamour was ripped apart before we even entered. Runes shone on the tunell walls, panes of force fell down around us and dwarven yells sounded in the distance. I looked up angrily.

"Can I really not have a *single* chicken?" I complained. "You tight-fisted assholes."

Chapter 59

Audience

> "Note: bottling up the power of friendship cannot be achieved by bottling up friends. Must pursue further trials, perhaps prior liquefaction diluted the substance."
>
> Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

So, runic trap. Just what my day had been needing. I ran a palm across the transparent pane of force and found it solid. A sharp rap of the knuckles told me it was probably breakable, if I exerted myself. This wasn't a ward so much a magical pit trap, although one we'd strolled right into.

"Cat," Indrani hissed. "Now's a good time to do the Winter thing."

Was it, though? The panes didn't mute sound, so I could hear the dwarves running towards us. It was hard to tell their numbers, with all that armour jostling, but I'd wager at least a hundred. I could most likely shatter the back of the trap and leg it with the others back into the tunnels. Except we'd have a dwarven company hot on our heels, the alarm would spread and there was a non-negligible chance we'd end up in more or less the same situation in half an hour, only with having attempted to escape added to our first impression.

"We're going to talk to them," I finally said.

"Or you could open a godsdamned portal and get us out of here," Indrani said. "Like, now."

"To where?" I said. "Either we go blind, which seems like a *very bad idea* underground, or we go back. Where the army is."

"Or we could stay in Arcadia for a bit, until they're gone," she said.

"The gate out would lead us back here," Diabolist said. "I do not believe it likely they will leave this place unguarded after the traps were triggered."

"Archer, they'll be curious enough about our presence they'll want to interrogate us," I said. "If it really does go to shit, I'll grab everyone and leg it into Arcadia. But I want to *try* to talk to them first, at least."

I caught movement form the corner of my eye, but it wasn't dwarves. The drow accompanying us had gone still, when the runes shone, but the conver-

sation between the three of us had gotten their attention. We'd been speaking Lower Miezan, so not even Ivah should be able to understand us, but if they were guessing from the tones that might not matters. One of the drow we'd caught on surface said something in Crepuscular, addressing Ivah, who nodded and then turned silver eyes to me.

"They would like weapons, Queen, since we are to fight," my guide said in Chantant.

"We won't be fighting them," I replied in the same. "I'm going to speak with whoever leads them."

"Nerezim do not negotiate, Queen," Ivah flatly said. "They take what they want and kill all in their way."

"It is," I told the drow. "I am queen of a kingdom, on the surface, and powerful enough they will not seek my enmity for no reason."

"This is not true of us," it said. "We will be slain."

"You're my prisoners," I said "Until release or judgement, you are under my protection."

"They will not care," Ivah insisted.

"Ivah, you seem under the impression any you have a voice in this decision," I said. "You do not. It has been made."

"They will not accept this," the drow warily said.

"They are free to contest my judgement, of course," I said. "Though the consequences of that have already been stated."

Ivah grimaced and turned to speak, but before it could even do that the Mighty Kodrog – no, Bogdan now – made its move. The drow pushed one of its fellow prisoners away and reached for the longknife at Archer's hip. Apparently after failing with me, it had come under the impression it would have better luck with my companions. Archer gave him the knife, in a manner of speaking. It was only a lending, though, and she clamly withdrew it from the eye socket with a flick of the wrist. The other drow stepped back. Great, now I was going to meet the dwarves with a fucking corpse on the floor. Although, considering their record so far, that might actually raise their opinion of us.

"Tell them this," I addressed Ivah. "They can die now, or take a chance on the future. There is no middle ground, and I've no more attention to spare on this. Akua, if any of them tries to escape kill it."

"Any?" Diabolist asked.

I met Ivah's eyes.

"Any," I confirmed.

My statement that I had no more attention to dole out had not been theatrics: the dwarves were now close enough I could make out the individual steps. They did not come from deeper inside the cavern. The company of a hundred that spread out in front of the trap had been posted near the outer wall, to the left of the tunnel's exit. Regulars again, I noted, and since now the dance had come to end I finally spared a moment to study dwarvenkind from up close. I'd pictured them as short, stocky humans but evidently that'd been a

failure of imagination. There were basic similarities: eyes, nose, brow, lips. But they were the same more in principle than practice. Their skin was so rough and craggy, enough it looked more like some beast's rough hide. The old tale that dwarves were born when a dwarf ate stones for a year and then spat out a baby fully-formed came to mind. Their eyes were almost too large for those thick faces, with coloured sclera and no irises. *Owl-like*, I thought, though they had eyelashes. Their strands of hair were visibly larger and thicker than a human's, their noses flat and broad. The tallest of the lot stood at five feet, though they were much broader of shoulder than any race I'd come across save orcs. The dwarves spread out facing us, shields and hammers at the ready.

"Good evening," I smiled.

A few of them spoke in dwarvish, rough accents flowing back and forth quickly, and there was a sparse wave of laughter. One of the dwarves elbowed his way to the front, attired differently from the rest. The armour was much like the one the engineers had worn, back in the other cavern, a cuirass on leather. Said cuirass was covered with runes, though, which I didn't remember the others being. The dwarf, sporting a thick black beard thrice bound by rings of bronze showing runes of their own, frowned at me and laid a bare palm on the transparent pane. His frown deepened and he barked something in his language at the other dwarves.

"I don't supposed you speak Lower Miezan," I said.

His eyes, a ring of deep gold around a pitch-black pupil, moved to my face.

"You," he said in that very language, though the accent was nearly unintelligible. "Human."

"Close enough," I agreed.

He pointed at the drow behind me, finger lingering on the corpse.

"*Kraksun*," he said. "Why?"

"Prisoners," I said.

He turned back to the others and spoke again. One of the dwarves spoke loudly and the entire company shook with laughter. I got the impression that what he'd said was complimentary to neither humans nor drow. Another dwarf, this one's beard russet, raised a baton of stone and silence took hold. He spoke at the one wearing runes, who shrugged and turned back to me.

"You," he said. "Prisoner."

"I want to talk with your leader," I said, enunciating slowly.

A dwarf left the ranks of the others, bearing a bag of woven reeds, and dropped it to the side of my interlocutor. Who promptly opened it, and took out a pair of rune-inscribed shackles. They weren't linked by chains, I noted.

"Wear," the black-bearded dwarf said.

"I want to talk with your leader," I repeated, forcing patience.

The dwarf rolled his eyes, the size of those making it rather eerie to behold, but he spoke to the one with the baton. Who replied with a single word. Yeah, that one needed no translation. I sighed and rolled my shoulders before plunging my hand through the pane of force and ripping out a chunk. The

black-bearded dwarf drew back in surprise, the soldiers moved forward and I smiled once more.

"I want to talk with your leader," I said one last time, looking at the russet-bearded one.

His eyes flicked at the trap I'd casually ripped open, then back to me. He barked something at our interpreter.

"Who you?" the dwarf asked.

"The Queen of Callow," I said.

The dwarf looked skeptical. He pointed a finger upwards.

"Callow," he repeated slowly.

"Yes," I said.

"Angry horse people," he said, even more skeptically.

Well, that was one way to describe us. His eyes dipped down to note what I assumed to be my current lack of horse. What, did he just expect all Callowans to be mounted at all times?

"Of which I am queen," I agreed.

He translated at the russet beard who snorted. He gestured a knock against his temple, the meaning of which I felt safe assuming. Then he shrugged and added something else. Blackbeard turned back to me.

"Speak to Herald," he said. "But."

He presented the shackles again. I mulled on that, eventually jutting a thumb towards the people behind me.

"Mine," I said. "Safe. No touch."

The dwarf spat on the floor.

"No touch," he agreed. "Herald choose."

It was a start. I offered my wrists to the shackles, and the dwarf leaned forward to clasp them closed. The runes – nothing like those I knew, sharper and much more complicated – shone and I felt a binding form. Ah, meant to seal sorcery. Or at least have an effect when someone called on them. Were they assuming I was a mage? It was a flip of the coin whether or not Winter would be affected by those. My ability to call on it was uninhibited, so far. I looked back at my companions.

"Negotiations will proceed," I said. "Cooperate."

Archer looked quite displeased, but Diabolist simply nodded. She was the first to come forward when the dwarf presented another pair of shackles, sharing a meaningful look with me afterwards. They weren't affecting her either, then. Good to know. The drow came forward one after another, each of them moving delicately as if they feared the slightest sudden move would get them killed. They might not be wrong about that, I reflected. It had not escaped my notice than when the drow came forward some of the soldiers discretely put up their crossbows. Indrani was the last, and she shot me a glare.

"We could have legged it," she said in Kharsum.

"We still might," I replied in the same. "Day's not over."

She put forward her wrists, and with that last clasping we were all officially prisoners. Blackbeard drew a circle on the transparent wall then pressed his palm against the rune that formed inside it. It came down without a sound. From the corner of my eye, I'd glimpsed Akua watching him work eagerly. Never one to lose an opportunity, was she? The soldiers swarmed us after that, though at least they put away their weapons first. I was guided forward in a surprisingly gentle manner, though I stopped when I heard Indrani raise her voice.

"No you don't," she hissed.

One of the dwarves was tugging at her bow, eyes half-closed. I looked for Blackbeard was he'd melded into the crowd. Another dwarf raised his hammer when Indrani pushed away the one trying to get at her bow, speaking loudly. Every dwarf around us turned.

"Archer," I called out.

She turned to me.

"Cat, they want to take-"

"I know," I said. "Let them."

"You know they keep shit like this," she said. "And the Lady will *kill* me if I lose it."

"I'll get it back," I said. "I promise."

"You'd better," she growled.

Lips thinning in anger, she took out her bow and shoved it forcefully in the dwarf's arms. The soldier almost toppled, looking furious, though his companions laughed. Another one was eyeing the sword at my hip, so I smiled blandly and took it out. Hammers rose again, but I presented it by the hilt. The dwarf blinked, but took it anyway. If it'd been goblin steel I might have felt a pang, but this was just a sliver of Winter. I could recall it to my mantle at will, what did I care who held it? We were taken deep into the cavern in a procession, surrounded by soldiers. The vanguard, I saw, had made camp here. Tents of cloth that were charmingly small dotted the place, while makeshift ramparts of piled stones had been raised around siege engines and supply wagons. At the centre of the camp I glimpsed a large dais of stone, a high seat upon it. Anyone important enough to warrant that was worth talking with, I mused. The first hiccup arrived when I was taken toward that dais but the others were not. I stopped, to the displeasure of the dwarf escorting me. I pointed at Akua.

"She comes with me," I said.

The dwarf made a face, blatantly not understanding a word I'd said and rather displeased I was talking at all. He tugged at my wrist, but it would take more than a pushy dwarf to move if I did not want to be moved. My escort barked out in his language until Blackbeard returned.

"Why you not move," he asked impatiently.

I pointed at Akua again.

"She's coming with me," I said.

He shook his head.

"Prisoner," he said.

"She's my handmaiden," I lied.

The dwarf blinked, looking confused. Didn't know that word, huh?

"My herald," I said.

Blackbeard frowned.

"You human," he pointed out.

Was he implying no human could possibly be important to have a herald? Good to know the High Lords had a superior even in matters of bloody-minded arrogance.

"Human queen," I reminded him.

He still looked unconvinced, but must have decided arguing wasn't worth the trouble. An order had Diabolist taken aside from the others and brought to me.

"Your Majesty," Akua said, bowing to me.

Quick on the uptake, Diabolist. Sometimes in the wrong way, but there was a reason I wanted her with me when speaking with whatever fancy beard was in charge. We were escorted the rest of the way to the dais without any further trouble. The seat was facing the other way, so it was the dais itself that earned a second glance. Roughly hewn stone, and I was pretty sure a single piece. Handhold were carved into the sides. Had they carried this here? Lots of trouble for a seat. We were brought in front of the high chair, where a full two hundred of those heavy soldiers from earlier was waiting in silent stillness. The seat, I could not help but notice, was empty. I glanced at Blackbeard.

"... am I supposed to talk to the chair?" I asked.

Big eyes stared me down without a word.

"That's a no, then," I muttered. "I'll wait."

Not long after the rows of soldiers parted for a pair of dwarves, which seemed promising to me. The first was the tallest dwarf I'd seen so far, and the first without any armour. He wore cloth, dyed a green so dark it was nearly black, though I didn't recognize the style or the cut. It was wrapped and knotted in layers over layers, heavy enough it might actually slow an arrow. His beard was dyed as well, in the same colour, and his eyes matched. The hair was black, though, long and braided. The staff in his hand was crooked thing of wood with trinkets of some strange metal hanging off the end, softly chiming as he walked. The other was one of those Archer had called *deed-seekers*, and his chest was so thickly covered in skulls the armour could not be seen beneath. Some of those were human, I noted, but most too large for that. I even glimpsed dragonbone among the multitude, though that struck me as the result of grave robbing rather than fighting. There were few dragons left on Calernia, and the death of one would have resounded across the continent. Blonde of beard and hair, his face was covered with either an exceedingly thick black tattoo or pristine face paint. The shape was a rat's head and fangs, though the horns sprouting out made it clear it was not just *any* ratling. The two of them came to

stand before the dais, though they did not touch it, and the deed-seeker cleared his throat.

"Chantant?" he asked in that same language.

I wiggled my palm.

"Lower Miezan?" I tried.

The dwarf nodded.

"You stand before the Herald of the Deeps," he announced. "Name yourself."

Akua replied without any need for prompting on my part.

"I introduce Her Majesty Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow and Sovereign of Moonless Nights," she said, sketching a bow.

The deed-seeker cocked his head to the side.

"I am Balasi, Seeker of Deeds," he said. "I will translate for the Herald. You may kneel."

I smiled amicably.

"I do not kneel," I said. "My attendant will do so out of respect."

Akua elegantly did so under the emotionless eyes of the dwarves, rising just as fluidly. Balasi turned a bronze gaze to Blackbeard, who still stood at my side, and spoke in their language. The dwarf replied in length, then paused and quickly tacked on something. The Herald's lips quirked in amusement, Balasi laughed outright.

"I feel like I've heard that one before," I noted.

The deed-seeker inclined his head.

"Even a lizard can eat a tadpole," he said.

My brow rose.

"Guess you had to be there," I said.

Which I had been. I did not smile.

"It loses in the translation," Balasi said. "The words... even an idiot can bully a dimwit?"

Ah, charming. We were going to get along great, I could just feel it.

"I take it the dimwits are the drow," I said.

"You have taken some of the *kraksun* prisoner," he acknowledged. "A matter of great hilarity to us."

"I did notice you haven't bothered, so far," I said.

The dwarf bared his teeth.

"Only children pet vermin," he said.

About what I'd expected out of them, though it was still jarring to hear it spoken out loud. The casual dismissal of an entire race as pests. *Not that the drow are any better*, I thought. There was little difference between cattle and vermin, when it came down to it. The Herald spoke softly, addressing his translator, who then turned to us.

"His Eminence would know why you have come to the Everdark," he said.

My instinct was to answer, to establish some kind of relationship, but this was diplomacy and not an evening at the tavern. If I fielded all the questions

myself, I was implying myself to be on the same level as the Herald's translator. Which was something I needed to avoid, if I wanted to be considered an interlocutor and not a curiosity. I held my tongue and let Diabolist speak in my stead. It was, after all, why she was here.

"Her Majesty sought to raise an army of drow to war against her enemies on the surface," Akua said. "We were unaware that the Kingdom Under intended to invade when we began our journey."

"You are aware now," Balasi said. "You will be allowed to depart unmolested. Your prisoners will remain, as they may know useful information."

"A decision perhaps premature," Akua replied. "It seems our interests may have fallen in alignment."

The deed-seeker fixed her with a steady look.

"Callow intends to meddle in the affairs of the Kingdom Under?" he said, very mildly.

"Callow is willing to pursue its interest so long as they do not contradict those of the King Under the Mountain," she smoothly replied. "We would consult with you to ensure such an unfortunate turn of events will not come to be."

"You're not human," Balasi thoughtfully said. "Some sort of spirit, bound in service. The kingdom you claim to come from is not known for such pacts."

"The world ever changes, Seeker Balasi," Akua smiled. "New eras demand new methods, lest we be left in the dust."

"You're a long way from home, Callowans," the dwarf said. "Stumbling into matters beyond your understanding. To presume to even speak of them is a dangerous kind of arrogance."

"You are correct, Seeker," the shade said. "We *are* a long way from home. With little love for those who dwell here, and a mind open to fresh opportunities. It would be a sad thing to turn a blind eye to mutual profits without good motive."

I left her to it, my eyes drawn to the Herald's staff. The trinkets, in particular. It was a subtle thing, but there was power to them. They were no simple decoration. My eyes narrowed. Not, not the trinkets themselves. Something inside them, bound.

"The shackles do not bind you," the Herald of the Deeps said in perfect Lower Miezan.

The other two went silent as I met those eldritch green eyes. I called on a sliver of Winter and tore off one of the shackles like it was made of parchment, runes struggling impotently.

"They do not," I agreed.

"You are not human," the Herald said.

"I was," I replied. "Then I murdered a demigod and stole his power."

"And so you come to the Everdark," the dwarf said. "Seeking yet more."

"I have a great many enemies," I said. "Enough it might be said we share a few."

The Herald smiled, slow and mean.

"I offer hospitality to you, Queen of Callow," he said. "Let us eat, drink, and talk of murdering gods."

Well, *now* they were speaking my language.

Chapter 60

Profiteers

> "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is lynched."
>
> Praesi saying

Since my crowning I'd found it necessary to occasionally entertain 'people of import'. It wasn't something I particularly enjoyed, but a shared meal and a bottle of wine was a decent way to take a good look at what influential individuals of Callow were up to. Most of the time it'd been members of the Queen's Council or envoys from my governors, more rarely emissaries from the northern baronies. Those dinners tended to be calm affairs, where more importance was placed on the conversation than the food. I rather preferred the dwarven take on it, all things told. After nibbling at rations for weeks, a slab of ribs lathered in sauce with a goblet of some kind of pitch-black liquor that smelled like berries and kicked like a mule were a delightful change of pace. The Herald had made a point out of being the one to offer them, even if another dwarf brought the plates, which I guessed to be some point of dwarven etiquette. The table was granite and low even by my standards, though it'd clearly been crafted with burlier types in mind: Akua and I didn't even come close to filling our side of it.

The Herald and his interpreter – not that he needed one, as it turned out – had dug into their own plates without any mannerly pretences. I followed suit, rather enjoying the meat even though I did not recognize it. The liquor was a treat though, I'd own to that much. Diabolist was more interested in the fine make of the cutlery we were using than the meal, though she made sure to eat and drink enough no insult would be taken. The dwarves polished off their plates at admirable speed, knocking back the liquor all the while, and it was not long before all were finished. There'd been no attempt at conversation while the plates were on the table, not from their side anyway. I'd followed suit, in no great hurry, and Akua had followed my example. Soldiers took away the plates when we were done, bringing bowls of tepid water to the table where the dwarves soaked their fingers clean before wiping on cloths. My brows rose.

They were a strangely clean people, for a race that dwelled in dirt. Still, I imitated them and saw with mild disappointment that our cups and bottle were taken away.

"Diplomacy cannot be had over such mild drinks, Queen Catherine," Balasi told me amusedly, having noticed my look. "It would be unseemly."

"Your people have an enlightened sense of etiquette, Seeker," I replied. "The liquor, may I ask what it is called?"

"Black kasi," the dwarf said. "I will part with a bottle as gift, should these talks be fruitful."

It'd been a long time since a bribe that baldly offered had tempted me even a little, I mused.

"The stakes have been raised," I drily replied.

Soldiers returned with four small wooden bowls and set them down before each of us. I studied mine curiously: oak, if I was not mistaken. Old and rough, never varnished or sculpted. A heavy glass bottle was brought, and the dwarven soldier bearing it very carefully poured maybe half a cup's worth of liquid into each bowl. It looked like wine, I thought, but vapour wafted off the surface and it was very clearly near boiling. I glanced at Balasi and found him staring at his own bowl reverently.

"It must be allowed to seep," he told me. "These bowls have never seen other purpose than the cradling of *sudra*, and so the taste of old toasts mixes with the new."

"I'm honoured," I said, inclining my head.

"As it should be," the Herald said. "No such bottle has ever left the Kingdom Under. I doubt more than a dozen of your kind ever tasted *sudra*, much less properly served."

It was utterly wasted on me, considering my tastes in drink had moved from 'decent table wine' to 'nearly flammable' since I'd taken up my mantle. It might be undiplomatic to say as much, though, and I *was* curious about the taste. I inclined my head again, a little deeper this time. The Herald of the Deeps responded in kind.

"You were introduced as Queen of Callow," the green-eyed dwarf said. "Yet your second name is Foundling, not Fairfax."

"There are no more Fairfaxes," I said. "They were slain to the last, when the Dread Empire of Praes conquered Callow. I am first and only of my line."

"A worthy purpose, that will have earned no small burden," Balasi said approvingly.

The Herald turned amused eyes on him, then back to me.

"You will have to forgive my old friend," he said. "He is quite the radical, even for a seeker of deeds."

"No offence was taken," I said. "There was none to be found, in my eyes."

"I have told you before, *delein*," the deed-seeker snorted. "The ways of their kind may be chaotic, but they are not without merit."

"To each thing born, purpose and burden," the Herald chided. "What you seek as correction is mere revelation. Our truth is absolute."

I was missing too much context to be able to truly follow that exchange, but some guesses could be hazarded. Purpose and burden, huh. There was a weight to that, one familiar to me. *Name and Role*. Indrani had said that the deed-seeker were trying to win something other dwarves thought they weren't supposed to have. Considering their way of going about it was to hunt the most dangerous creatures around, their behaviour might just be an attempt to raise their 'purpose' by first raising their 'burden'. Interesting, and worth keeping in mind, but not ultimately why I was seated here with them.

"From your question I take it you're not too familiar with surface affairs," I said.

"They are neither my charge nor concern," the Herald said. "Balasi is more knowledgeable of such affairs, though it has been some time since he last journeyed upwards."

"Last I heard, Praes was trying to invade your people and getting smacked around for the presumption," the deed-seeker said. "Queen Moirin was ruling, I believe."

Queen Moiren, he likely meant. The grandmother of Good King Robert, the Fairfax who'd died on the Fields of Streges failing to turn back the Conquest. Anything they knew of the surface dated back at least a hundred years, then.

"Callow was conquered, and under my aegis was made independent again," I said. "We are now at war with most the great powers of the surface, three of which have declared a crusade on Praes and would break my homeland on their march to the Tower."

"And so you come to the Everdark in your hour of need," Balasi said. "You must truly be desperate, to seek anything but corpses from the *kraksun*."

"I've knocked at every other door," I said. "The Dead King is on the march, now, and there are no limits to his hunger. This is no time to be squeamish about one's allies."

"The *kraksun* will flee, or perish," the Herald of the Deeps said, and he spoke it not as promise or prophecy but as mere fact.

As if there could be no doubt. Gods, maybe there wasn't. What little I knew of these people was enough to have me very, very wary – and they were just the vanguard.

"Such an outcome may very well be inevitable," Akua said. "Yet the path by which it is reached remains shadowed, does it not? There is little purpose in entertaining us otherwise."

Balasi cast a look at me.

"You allow your spirit a great deal of freedom," he said.

"She has her uses," I mildly replied. "And considering the costs of her service, she will be worked until she breaks."

Diabolist bowed her head at me, without the slightest hint of displeasure on her face. It could be true, I thought. The right of the victor, she'd called it.

It could also be a lie, and I would never know until the end. My very own viper, always dangerous no matter how tight the leash.

"How much do you know of this ruin of a realm, Queen Catherine?" the Herald asked.

I hesitated. Admitting ignorance here might see me hoodwinked. Dwarves were infamously disinclined to fair bargains. On the other hand, pretending to be an expert where I was not was just as dangerous in its own way. These were not people to trifle with.

"Little in most matters, yet I have glimpsed deep in some," I finally said. "My power is both kin and foe to the Priestess of Night's, in some eldritch way."

The green-eyed dwarf nodded slowly.

"I have long studied their kind," he said. "Seven wars we fought against them, two of them lost. Yet we won the last three, and the lands of their ancient colonies were swallowed in the Ninth Expansion. The echo of the last defeat saw them collapse, hiding behind the Gloom and turning their knives on each other. They are a pale imitation of what they once were."

"A ruin of a realm," I softly agreed. "And the spider at the centre of the web lies waiting in Tvarigu."

"She is more monster than woman now," Balasi said. "She devoured the Twilight Sages, it is said, and made them into the first of the Night. She has only grown since: her hand is on every knife, her lips wet with every red bite."

"A creature without purpose," the Herald said, and there was hatred in his voice. "A burden on all her kind. You surface people quibble over devils and books, but the Sve Noc is breathing blasphemy. Voices were raised, when we warred against the goblins, and Ishti's Bargain extended as mercy. Yet there was only silence in the Deep Places, when call was made for war on the Everdark."

"I have known little but war since I was sixteen," I quietly said. "And so I know this: annihilation is a costly enterprise. To break an enemy is one thing, to destroy it wholesale another."

"Yet annihilation is the only path, so long as the Sve Noc draws breath," Balasi said. "Many will die, for this purpose. It will take decades to scatter the greatest of the Mighty and lay siege to Tvarigu itself, perhaps as long as a century. We will not have that."

"The King of Death has turned his eyes to the wars of the surface," the Herald said. "Yet we have seen this before. It never lasts. The dead will return to the depths soon enough."

The green-eyed dwarf leaned in.

"The Gloom must fall," the Herald of the Deeps said. "You fled forward, I think, without seeing our host. It is not only that, Queen of Callow. We have brought artisans and tenders, masons and runescribes. Families as well as soldiers."

My fingers clenched under the table.

"You intend to settle the outer rings," Akua said in my stead. "To raise fortress-cities from which you can fight the war against the drow even after the Dead King returns."

"A long and bleak exile, for hundreds of thousands," Balasi said. "None who felt this to be their purpose expect to see their kin for many years. The Fourteenth Expansion will be a treacherous one."

"Yet if someone killed the Priestess of Night," I said. "The Gloom would end. No exile, no hard decades of war severed from home."

"Slayers have been sent before," the Herald said. "As far as we known, none lived to reach the inner ring."

"Yet you have taken *kraksun* prisoner," Balasi said. "Used them. A dwarf would be attacked on sight. A human, of sufficient power? That would be different matter."

I took a moment to let the implications of that sink in. Not that they wanted me to traipse through the Everdark and murder yet another demigod for their advantage – that much I'd expected – but the sheer scope of what they were undertaking. *Hundreds of thousands*, Seeker Balasi had said. That was all of eastern Callow, I thought. All those people sent marching across some sorcerous barrier not out of fear or desperation, but because the empire of the dwarves had deemed it strategic necessity to destroy the drow. What kind of empire could do that? The sum whole of the Tenth Crusade, which had three great nations joined, could barely muster two hundred thousand soldiers. I'd read as a child that the Kingdom Under likely spanned two thirds of Calernia underground: that to the east it reached the heartlands of Praes, to the south it touched the upper half of the Dominion. To the west a gate was rumoured to exist in the coastal principality of Brus, though one scarcely used, and the Kingdom of the Dead had long been thought to be the northern border of the dwarven kingdom. I was no longer certain that was the case, to be honest.

I'd read the words stating all that, ink on parchment, but never really understood them until now. Black had once called the Kingdom Under the only Calernian nation that could be considered more than a regional power. I'd not disbelieved him, I'd had no reason to, but neither had I truly taken the words to heart. Mighty as the dwarves were, they were barely Calernian in the end. Their presence was lightly felt, more an adjacent existence one must avoid provoking than a nation we shared borders with. I supposed that was true, in a way – could an ant really have a border with a giant? And while the great nations of the surface had been tearing each other to shreds for yards of land or points of principles, the Kingdom Under had grown so great it could afford to send a few hundred thousand soldiers and settlers into the dark for a mere gamble. A possibly century-long roll of the dice that would shatter a people's spine over the knee of the King Under the Mountain if it worked. I wasn't a nobody, I knew. I'd done things that would be remembered in histories. In sheer power, there were only a handful of people on the continent that could be called my equal and even fewer my superior.

All of that was dust in the eyes of the people I was speaking with. It was worth remembering that much, before I tried to strike a pact.

"I supposed most queens would find it beneath their dignity to play the assassin for a foreign power," I finally said. "Fortunately, I have no such qualms. You need the Sve Nocte removed and the Gloom lifted. I believe I can deliver this."

"Then we now speak of terms," the Herald said. "You will want payment, for this service."

"I will," I said. "Before that is discussed, forgive my ignorance but I am uncertain of what your title means. Does it carry the authority to make such a deal?"

Balasi's face turned stormy and he pulled at his beard, but the Herald quelled him with a look.

"I am the Herald of the Deeps," the green-eyed dwarf said, and his voice rang with power. "Promises I make will be observed by all who call themselves dwarves."

I could taste the power in the air, the sharp tang of it. My eyes narrowed. *Named*, I thought. *That man is Named.* Until now there had not been so much as a mote of spillover, which was worth noting. I hadn't seen that kind of control since Black. The dwarf was either a religious or cultural figure of some sort, from the sounds of it. Some kind of priest? Curious as I was, it was not necessary to delve too deep in the ways of the dwarves to make a deal. Asking questions now would only distract from that.

"Understood," I simply said. "Shade?"

Akua leaned in over the table. She knew what I needed, right now, and would be better at bargaining for it. Soldiers were the most direly needed. Drow would have made for useful shock troops but if I could field a few thousand dwarves instead? It was a clearly superior outcome. There was precedent for their kind warring on the surface, though only as mercenaries. After that, my desires were split between diplomatic pressure and gold. An infusion of gold would get Callow through the worst of the current troubles, at least in some respects. Trade with the League of Free Cities had not ceased, and Mercantis never closed its shores to anyone: what my kingdom lacked and could not make could be bought, if we had the coin. On the other hand, a quiet word from the Kingdom Under to any of the powers might solve a lot of my troubles. Even something as simple as declaring the Kingdom of Callow under protection for two years would free my hands to do so much. If I could actually rebuild in peace instead of sinking all the treasury into the army... No doubt the Empress would continue striking through deniable means, but Thief was becoming better hand at the shadow games with every passing month. Breathing room would be godsent, and I could ask for starker price than that.

"Her Majesty came to the Everdark to obtain an army," Diabolist said. "As the days of the kraksun seem numbered, we will need to secure another source of soldiery."

Seeker Balasi smiled.

"You can have right of recruitment among them," he said. "Any you can take into your service will be spared, so long as they depart."

That was a broad promise, I thought. If I managed to sway even a third of the drow, were they really willing to let them go? I supposed it made sense, from their perspective. So long as they left the Everdark, they were no longer a dwarven problem.

"A right we possess, strictly speaking," Akua politely replied. "As you made it clear you have no intention of pursuit beyond the span of the Fourteenth Expansion. Dwarves have served as mercenaries before, this would not be significantly different."

"It is against decree to war on the surface when the Kingdom Under seeks expansion," the Herald said replied. "You will find no purchase here."

The deed-seeker frowned, then spoke to his fellow dwarf in their tongue. They traded a few sentences, then Balasi cleared his throat.

"While not in official capacity, I could speak to a few of my fellows," he offered. "Should you deliver, we could seek deeds in your wars."

"And how many of your fellows could we count on, Seeker?" Akua asked.

"Two, three hundred," Balasi said.

"Not a significant enough force, I take it," the shade asked me in Mtethwa.

"I already have enough monsters up my sleeves," I honestly replied. "What I need is solid foot to give the vultures pause. Three hundred wouldn't make Hasenbach or the Dead King think twice."

"Their deaths could be leveraged into greater dwarven involvement," she suggested.

"We'd also have to answer for that," I grunted. "Pass."

"Then we return to recruiting from the drow," Akua said. "Shall I press coin or influence?"

"Coin first," I decided. "Best we stand on our own, if we can have that that. But try to get protection if you can. Doesn't matter if it's short so long as we can call in the favour when we need it."

It would have been polite to call diplomacy what followed, but I knew haggling when I saw it. That Akua was arguing the murder of a lesser god was not cheap instead of loudly exclaiming fresh fish for silver was highway robbery did not make the substance of what took place any different. It was a delicate line to walk for Diabolist. We were useful to the dwarves, but not *necessary* – there was only so far she could push. I'd learned to put a leash on my temper, over the years, but I was still glad she was the one doing the talking. Balasi was near-openly trying to screw us, first suggesting a loan to the Kingdom of Callow instead of outright payment. As was always the way with these things, what was hammered out was a compromise no one was truly happy with. The treasury in Laure would be getting enough coin that Juniper should be able to raise the Army of Callow as she saw fit without picking clean every last copper,

though after the expenses of feeding the southern refugees through the winter I suspected we'd have a rather tight belt when spring came around.

Though Akua pushed hard for a degree of open support from the dwarves, the Herald personally killed the notion. What we got was a little more abstract, though in some ways just as useful: for the next five years, sale of weapons to any nation at war with the Kingdom of Callow would end. I would dearly like to see Cordelia Hasenbach try to raise half the countryside of Procer without a steady supply of cheap dwarven armaments. Unlike Praes, Procer had no large set of forges and smithies directly under the authority of the ruler: her options without the Kingdom Under propping up the war effort were few and rather unpalatable. Our right of recruitment from the drow was confirmed, under condition that they left the Everdark without fighting. It was at least two hours before everything was settled, Diabolist arranging for the payments and announcements being carried out through Mercantis as swiftly as possible. We ended as we began, drinks in hand: at the Herald's careful instruction we raised the wooden bowls and drank deep of the *sudra*. It was smooth all the way down, I thought, yet no sweeter for it. There was a faint aftertaste that was almost coppery. Like blood.

A fitting drink for this pact, then.

Chapter 61

Remonstration

> "Beware those who peddle sweet truths, for that which cleanses is rarely gentle."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

I tossed the bow and Indrani snatched it out of the air. She ran her hand down the length, checking it for damages, and only after she'd made certain it was in pristine condition did she turn her eyes to me.

"How much did it cost you?" she asked.

"Not a copper," I said. "Restitution was tacked onto to a larger bargain."

"We're going on a hunt, then," she smiled. "It was about damned time. We've been creeping around for too long."

I wasn't all that surprised she'd caught on to the nature of my pact with the dwarves without being briefed. I had precious little to offer the Kingdom Under save for the work of my blade. I'd sent Diabolist to gather our drow while attending to Indrani myself, though that situation felt like trouble brewing. Leaving the prisoners behind wasn't on the table: the dwarves might interrogate them before breaking their skulls and throwing them on the nearest corpse pile, neither part of which I wanted to come about. Taking them with us on the further journey was trouble too, though. They'd know I'd talked with the dwarves, and there was no guaranteed they wouldn't open their mouths whenever we ran into a drow powerful enough it could give me a challenge. I was currently inclined to let them go after pulling ahead of the army by a day or two. They could live and die on their own merits, after that. Ivah was the only one I had plans for, though I was still hesitating over pulling that particular trigger.

My mistakes had larger consequences than they used to, and nowadays there was no one to clean up behind me.

The prisoners were awaiting us at the edge of the camp, Diabolist standing among their number while a few companies of dwarven regulars kept an eye on the proceedings. More out of principle than fear, I thought. The shackles

had already been removed but still the drow looked uneasy, as if they expected the slaughter to begin any moment. The way some of the soldiers were very casually playing with their crossbows wasn't helping matters, and from the way grins split their beards the dwarves knew exactly what they were doing. I did not bother to offer our escorts any farewells before leaving. Goodbyes had already been traded with the two dwarves that mattered in the vanguard, and none of the other had done anything to deserve the courtesy. To the contrary, one might argue. Ivah had carefully remained close to me from the moment I arrived, and did not give distance until we'd left the large cavern. We went through another two dwarven chokepoints before finally leaving the territory they controlled, and only then did any of the drow let out a breath of relief.

We took our first break around an hour later, when they began to tire. Where before the prisoners had offered only fear, there was now a touch of reverence in their eyes – towards me, mostly, but Akua as well. From their point of view, we'd walked into the jaws of the wolf and gotten off without so much as a scratch to show for it. They might not know why, but they could not argue with the results. Our guide approached me while the others rested.

"You spoke truth, Queen," Ivah said, and smoothly knelt. "For the offence of doubting your word, I present myself for judgement."

I tore off a chunk of dried beef and popped it into my mouth, chewing as I considered the drow kneeling before me. Even on its knees, it was of a height with me sitting. Already I was missing the dwarves and their much more reasonable proportions. I could dismiss this out of hand, I thought. I'd often done this with my doubters in the past, especially when they had good reasons to doubt me. Those who had come into my service had done so after I'd proven myself, shown I could achieve results. This, though, this was different. I wasn't dealing with a human or an orc, not even a goblin. My grasp on drow culture was still weak, but I suspected that if I made it clear doubting me came without consequences then I was giving an open invitation to do so again. Akua had been just right enough I couldn't outright dismiss her, when she'd said it was worthless to offer people mercy when mercy had no worth in their eyes. I swallowed the last of the meat, then wiped my fingers on my legs. Measured response, I thought. My hand lashed out, swift as a snake, and the sharp tips of ice I'd formed at the end of the fingers raked across Ivah's right cheek. Four bloody clawmarks began dripping blood.

The drow did not flinch.

"A reminder," I said. "When the doubt next comes. You may consider the matter settled."

Ivah rose on shaky legs, and I dismissed it with a wave of the hand after telling it Diabolist would see to the marks. Indrani slid next to me barely a heartbeat later. She'd been pretty blatantly eavesdropping, though I'd seen no need to stop her. She pressed a skin into my hands, and I did not need to take a sniff to know it wasn't water. Her breath made that clear enough.

"So what's the plan?" Archer asked.

"We go to Holy Tvarigu," I said. "And have a pleasant chat with the Priestess of Night."

"Seems to me like we'll need to have a bunch of pleasant chats to get there in the first place," she mused.

"You and I are pleasantly chatty people, by reputation," I said.

"It'll be a load off my back for us to return to the basics," she admitted. "But you've got the look."

I glanced at her, finding her halfway between amused and annoyed.

"The look?"

"The one that says you're tripping all over your morals again," Indrani said. "It's led us to some *beautiful* scraps, mind you, but never before a long spot of hemming and hawing."

"What do you care?" I said.

She blinked in surprised and I passed a hand through my hair.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said. "But this isn't us, 'Drani. We don't have those talks. Did Hakram put you up to this?"

"Vivienne asked that I keep an eye out," she said. "On account of your last advisor around being 'Ol Portal Dazzle. Worries were had that if you got in a bad place our little friend would be eager to give you a push over the edge."

"I haven't talked to her about this," I said. "I don't intend to, either."

"So talk to me," Archer said. "I'm here, and mostly sober."

"Do you actually give a shit about any of this?" I bluntly asked. "I'm not saying this to be an ass to you. You never have before."

"I do give a shit about you, Catherine," she sighed. "Even when you're being an utter wench to me. You think I'm down here for the scenery?"

I bit my tongue. Taking out my mood on Indrani would be underserved, even if she was pushing me and she damn well knew it.

"Why *are* you down here?" I finally asked.

"Because that's where we went," she slowly replied, eyeing me dubiously. "How hard was the stuff the dwarves gave you?"

So that was how she wanted to play it, huh. Dumb. Usually I'd leave it at that, play it off with a quip or an insult. It was the way we worked, leaving things unspoken. But Gods, I was tiring of that. Of just... letting things go.

"You take orders from me, sometimes," I said. "But I've never considered you my subordinate. If you'd chosen to go back to Callow with the others, there wasn't anything I could have done about it."

"Hells, Catherine," she sighed. "Do we really need to do this?"

"Don't we?" I said. "Indrani, there's maybe ten people in all of Creation I can genuinely call my friends and I can barely claim to understand half of them. I keep leading you into one ugly mess after another, and for some of you I understand. Vivienne's in this for the kingdom, and Hakram... Hakram believes. In this, whatever it's become, even when I don't. I'm not trying to throw stones at you, Archer. There's just some days where I honestly wonder why you bother."

"It's not enough that you're my friends?" she asked.

"If that's your answer," I said, "and I mean your real answer – not us laughing this off and never mentioning it again – I'll take it. But I don't want either of us to survive the other and look back in twenty years regretting we were too proud to actually have an honest talk."

Her eyes narrowed.

"So, Ratface finally sunk in," she said, not unkindly. "Was worried it might happen. You took it too well when we learned."

I flinched.

"Cat, he-"

"I used him," I said, with terrible calm. "He was my friend, and I used him until it got him killed. It's... *Fuck*, Indrani. He still had so much left to do. Who does she take next, Aisha? Juniper?"

How many people do I need to lose before I'm just a raving monster who just happens to lack a Tower to rave from? The utter selfishness of that thought shamed me. They'd killed him and still I'd somehow made it all about me.

"We're not going to die that easily," Indrani said.

"We're not *invincible*, Archer," I hissed. "We just got savagely beaten by a dead elf and a giant rat, and those were the toys of what's waiting. All we got to show for it was Malicia taking home a victory once more, and fresh off that she took the knife to Ratface. We're in this mess and I can't protect any of you. You have to-"

"Have a reason we're here," she finished quietly. "Something worth the risks."

"You'd be fine without me," I tiredly said. "Maybe even better off. I'm a fool for saying that, because I need you more than I can put into words, but it's the damned truth. You can leave this at any time and none of my enemies will follow. And let's not pretend they're not *my* enemies, Indrani. We both know they're not really yours."

"Sure they are," Indrani replied.

"The moment you leave back for Refuge, Malicia and the crusaders forget you ever existed," I said. "That's not arguable, that's a fact."

She flicked my forehead. I reared back, more in surprise than pain.

"That's the problem with you, Cat," she said. "You say these sweet things, sometimes, but you still can't quite get out of your head. Refuge's not my home, it's a place I lived in for a while. The Lady being there is the only reason it exists and the only reason I ever went. You have this... loyalty for Callow. I don't really get it, the place is war-torn shithole, but if it's a madness then most of your people have it too. I don't have that for Refuge, or really anyone in it. There's nothing to go back to."

"You could travel," I said. "That what you really want, isn't it?"

She laughed, harshly.

"Gods, I can't get angry," Indrani said. "It's infuriating but that's why it works – because you're such a fucking idiot it can't possibly be manipulation. You think I want to leave without somewhere to get back to, Catherine?"

"You could-"

"Shut up," Archer interrupted. "For once in your life, just shut up and listen. You're right when you say you don't understand us, because you somehow missed who you opened your home to. Do you know why Hunter was afraid of me, when I came to fetch him? Because I used to beat him in the yard. Bad enough he'd bruise for weeks even as a Named. Not because I hated him or because we had a grudge, but because seeing it happen put a twinkle in Lady Ranger's eye. I would have slit his godsdamned throat, if it had done the same. I fought everyone there was to fight in Refuge until I could crush them underfoot, and then I went out into the Waning Woods to find harder opponents. I don't need a cause. I don't need a reason. Every time I come out on top, I prove that I *deserve* this. That I'm not a fucking charity case, some curiosity she picked up in Mercantis along with whatever artefact took her fancy that year."

"I'm not her," I said.

"No," she replied. "You're not. I trounced your ass the first time we met just so I could prove I was better than the Black Knight's pupil and somehow that just... never became an issue. I thought you were some kind weakling, at first, too afraid for revenge or a rematch. But then you picked a fight with a demon and its minions, not because you thought you could win but because you wouldn't accept losing."

"That's not a virtue," I said. "And that kind of thinking has gotten a lot of people killed."

"You keep your eye on the horizon, always have," she said. "Makes it that you always end up missing what you actually *do*. You opened your home to me. Your family. Shit, Cat, we might make fun of you but there's no one that doubts you'd murder your way through a kingdom for one of us. And you just handed that freely, asking nothing. Not even an oath. And now you're surprised we're willing to kill for it?"

"That's not what I meant to do," I quietly said.

"It wouldn't work if it was," she smiled mirthlessly. "It's like you don't realize who it is you took in. You think Masego asks himself whether people should be killed because he cares about Callowan justice? You found a kid who couldn't talk to others without a chart and you told him he wasn't mad or strange, that he was *right* and clever and worth something beyond his magic. Vivienne was so desperate to do something that mattered she joined a rebellion of people she didn't like or trust in a place where those have the life expectancy of a fly. She fought you, stole from you, and instead of slitting her throat you gave her your trust and told her what she wanted to hear the most: that she's a decent person and that *she can make a difference*. Hakram used to wonder why he even got

up in the morning, Catherine. He was barely even a person. Now he's got such searing purpose his own Name made it that he doesn't need to sleep."

"That was all them," I thought. "I didn't change anything. I'm not owed-"

"You try to be good," Indrani said. "Or at least decent. So you've got this idea that all of us were, before you came along. That you dirty us by making us fight, that you're somehow imposing on who we'd be otherwise. Set that aside, because it only ever existed in your head. You took in wild animals, fed them and gave them a place by the fire. Loved them, in your own terrible way."

Shadowed eyes met mine, the glint in them a savage thing.

"None of us forgot the years out in the wilds, Catherine," she said, baring her teeth. "It was cold and dark and lonely, and if we have to make a graveyard of half this fucking continent to never go there again then *that's what we'll do*."

I did not reply, because after that what could I possibly say? Archer snatched the skin back from me and rose to her feet.

"Gods," she grimaced. "I can't believe you made me do that. Where's Hakram when you need him?"

"Indrani," I said. "I-"

"Don't," she curtly said. "I have no idea what you're wrestling with, right now, but I'll say this: you've been running scared since Second Liesse. We've all seen how it stayed with you, but grieving is one thing and this is another. If you let it bury you, then you've failed those people twice instead of once."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"An occasionally halfway-clever woman once told me she didn't win battles because she was the Squire," Indrani said. "Or because she had tricks and fancy mantle. You're afraid of what's coming? Then do what you need to and stand with your back straight. Let them take a swing. See where it gets them."

She strode away without another word, already guzzling away at the skin as if liquor could wash away the embarrassment reddening her cheeks. I stayed there sitting in silence for who knows how long, never taking a breath. It had warmed me, what she'd told me. But it terrified me as well, and not only because of her own words. *Your people becoming warped by your presence*, the Grey Pilgrim had said, *old traits grown more vicious and acute.* I wanted to deny him, as or all his kindly appearance he was a man very much trying to kill me.

And yet.

Archer believed all the hard edges in my companions had been there long before they came across me. That it was circumstance making them come out, not some deeper sinister influence. She might be right. Was is not, in a way, supremely arrogant to decide I was responsible for who they were and what they were willing to do? Masego had been raised by a villain and and a devil, Archer by cold-eyed thrill killer and Hakram was an orc – his people's bouts of savagery filled the pages of history books. Vivienne had been the Thief before ever hearing I existed, and had walked that narrow line between Good and Evil for most her life. Her stolen riches had never gone to feed orphans or the

destitute: she'd been settling a grudge. A deeply Callowan thing to do, but if nothing else the last few years had brought out in sharp relief that my people's penchant for vengeance was not necessarily a thing of the Heavens.

The old voice in the back of my head gave answer soon enough. It would be easy, wouldn't it, to eschew responsibility for all of this? To let the comforting words wash over me, to share the burden of all the woe that had come to pass. But I'd seen it with my own eyes, decent men arguing for Bonfire. A little word that meant that slaughter of thousands of innocents simply to prevent Procer from sallying out against me. The excuses came swift and plentiful, that withholding that assault had led to the Battle of the Camps and the deaths of thousand anyway. That it was my enemies who had sought the war, not I. Justifications always came aplenty. I still felt a shiver of discomfort, when I realized at some point I'd become the kind of woman that would sow *justifications matter only to the just* on her own banner. What a vicious joke that'd turned out to be: even while espousing the words, had I ever really stopped telling myself what I was doing was necessary? I'd clutched that whisper tight and led my soldiers, my people, into one war after another.

The Queen of Summer had called us a woe unto all we would behold, and I felt that to be the most savage kind of prophecy: the one that called not on unearthly sight but simple recognition of character. Who was I, to take such grand decisions? Not even twenty-one, taught too little and haunted by grave mistakes. What right did I have to make decrees that might resound for centuries after my death? The fear was paralyzing, that I might botch the matter badly enough a dozen generations might pay for it. I was a drunkard playing dice with the fight of nations, compared to my enemies. I'd be damned for the disaster, and rightly. And yet, I thought with a dark smile, would I not also be damned for doing nothing at all? Maybe Black was right and I'd never been meant for grace at all, for the righteous choices of a hero's story. Maybe I'd always been who I'd told myself I had become, a deeper truth laid bare by power. Because in the end, if there was only damnation I would rather be damned out of error than fear.

And that left only one thing to do, didn't it?

I found Ivah standing along, the red marks of the blood I'd spilled dried on its cheek. It rose when I approached, but I waved that away. We settled down comfortably, out of anyone's earshot.

"It is my understanding," I said, "that you seek power. To redress what was done to you, to rise above where you once stood."

"That is so, Queen," Ivah said, silver bright in its eyes.

"Then I believe," I said, "it might be time for us to make deal."

Winter whispered in my ear, promises and imprecations, the distant howl of blizzard parted by the deep crack of great glaciers.

I let it.

Interlude: Queen's Gambit, Offered

"Do I even need to give the order?"

Dread Empress Massacre

"Mobility is how they have survived, Your Most Serene Highness," General Altraste said. "We have easily five times their number on the field, but divided and constantly forced to march in different directions. The moment the Legions are trapped we have won the battle."

The man's long and elaborate mustache moved distractingly as he spoke, though Cordelia forced herself to ignore it. Diego Altraste had duly embraced the Arlesite practice of turning his facial hair into a spectacle, keeping it waxed and curved with near-religious dedication. The First Prince had always thought the custom made men look like buffoons, though it would not be diplomatic to voice as much. Her court in Salia had scrupulously observed the latest fervours of southern nobility, as it would have been too easy to dismiss her as a barbarous Lycaonese otherwise. She herself rarely partook. A First Prince set fashion, they did not bow to it. Watching dainty Alamans ladies weave their hair into Rhenian war braids after she'd adopted the style for a few months had been a rare source of amusement in a year that had provided precious little of that.

"I am aware of the numbers, general," she replied. "And of how they have failed to lead to victories, no matter how oft repeated to me."

"I understand you are displeased by the fall of Lutes," the man delicately said.

Quite the understatement, that. Iserre's northern border was not a heavily armed one, as its ruling family's relations with Cantal had been more than cordial for decades. Their lines had intertwined so often it was a popular jest in Procer that to split the difference between the royalty of Cantal and Iserre one would need a very sharp knife. The Carrion's Lord descent into the Principality of Iserre had only one sharp obstacle, the old fortress-town of Lutes. A remnant of the days when ancient Arlesite tribes had pushed deep into Alamans territory, Lutes was a spit of rock with tall wall and taller towers. One

that boasted fewer than ten thousand souls, but unlike most of Iserre the town had been garrisoned. Bandits had tried to take it more than once in the past, and so Prince Amadis had found it prudent to station troops there after the Great War. Disaffected fantassins were but a hungry day away from banditry, after all, and there'd been quite a few of them in Procer after Cordelia ascended the throne.

None of the First Prince's commanders had kept to the illusion that Lutes would hold indefinitely, but there had been an expectation that it would slow down Praesi advance into Iserre. Perhaps long enough for the Levantine reinforcing army to make shore southwards enough it would be able to reinforce the gathering forces in the capital of Iserre, preventing its loss to the Legions. Instead the town had fallen literally overnight. The Carrion Lord had struck bargain with bandits, who'd infiltrated the fortress and opened the gates to his forces after night fell in exchange for the lion's share of the loot. The defenders were caught unawares and half-asleep, bloody massacre ensued and when dawn rose the Legions of Terror were marching south once more. Worse, the fact that the Black Knight had kept to his terms with the bandits had spread across the entire region. The temptation of treachery would only deepen, and the Silver Letters were not responding near swiftly enough for her tastes.

"I know little of matters of war," Cordelia said. "Yet it occurs to me that with the fall of that fortress, we have effectively lost the northern half of the principality. They cannot occupy it, of course, but more importantly we cannot *defend* it. And now you come to me with a scheme that involves abandoning yet another city to the enemy."

That this conversation even needed to be had was infuriating. A mere sixteen thousand men had escaped the Red Flower Vales to wage war on the greatest nation of Calernia's surface and yet the last four months had brought only word of defeat after defeat. Exiled vagabonds were burning a swath through the heartlands of Procer, which was a disaster in too many ways to count. Cordelia knew better than anyone how fragile the Principate truly was, at the moment. The land had not yet truly recovered from two decades of civil war, though she'd had few other choice than to wage yet another conflict – it would have been near-impossible to rebuild if the mass of fantassins left from the Great War were still there to agitate. Cantal being made a ruin had been a heavy blow, and if Iserre was put to the torch as well would mean starvation in the south-east come winter. The bloody Praesi were burning every granary they couldn't carry, after all, years of accumulated grain going up into smoke.

The most aggravating part was, she thought, that she still had armies to field but that she could not send them after the Black Knight. Now that Catherine Foundling had made it clear the Dead King's assault was imminent and not months away, the host under Uncle Klaus had to hurry north at the expense of all else. The northern invasion force under Princess Malanza was already marching towards Cleves, but the woman had made it clear that the Callowan campaign had left the army a wreck. The Black Queen had apparently assassi-

nated almost every professional officer in it, then butchered her way through a significant portion of the most reputable fantassin companies. Malanza had described her host as having *more generals than lieutenants*, and the First Prince did not need to be a seasoned veteran to understand the dangers of that. If Malanza held tall walls, she might weather the storm long enough for Uncle Klaus to arrive. If she did not make it to Cleves swiftly enough, the shores of the Tomb would fall and the Dead King would gain solid foothold in Procer.

The last significant Proceran force was guarding the border with the League of Free Cities, and it could not be moved. The political consequences of that would be dire enough – if Cordelia could no longer offer protection the Princess of Tenerife would seek another patron and further damage the First Prince's position in the Highest Assembly – but the strategic ones were worse. The League had yet to declare war, but it had mustered its armies. The moment the twenty thousand soldiers in Tenerife left the south became wide open to invasion. She'd attempted correspondence with the Hierarch to probe intentions and six months past the man had finally deigned to reply. Cordelia almost wished he hadn't. The missive had been three pages long, most of which castigating the notion of inherited rule as Wicked Tyranny, Procer itself as A Rapacious Pack Of Foreign Oligarchs and her suggestion of formal truce talks as Treason Against The Will Of The People. Which people in particular, she'd noted, he had not specified. He'd at least recognized her title of First Prince, as it was the result of an election.

The Tyrant of Helike had sent a secret missive along the other letter, swearing eternal friendship and making assurances that he'd increased the size of Helike's army twofold as a 'purely defensive measure'. He went on writing of his deep regrets for the recent civil war in the League, which he was apparently trying to cast himself as mournful of after single-handedly starting and winning. The First Prince had not known until then it was possible for someone's calligraphy to come across as blatantly insincere, but her horizons had since been expanded.

"Your Highness," General Altraste said, "may I be frank?"

"I expect all my officers to offer me truth, no matter how unpalatable," Cordelia replied, and meant it.

"If we try to defend the city with every force at our disposal, we may very well still lose it," he said. "And that defeat would be the end of Iserre. I will not pretend the plan I offer is pleasant to behold: it will require ugly sacrifice. But if we do not cut the rot before it spreads, it is not only Iserre we risk losing."

Cordelia did not answer. She looked out the windows instead, watched Salia below her. The tall bell towers of the many churches, the mansions and palaces of royalty. The people still filling every nook and cranny of the largest city on Calernia when autumn was painting leaves red and gold. She thought of a cold night in Rhenia, when she'd been seven and come across her mother drinking alone in the hall. Mother had still been half a goddess in her eyes, back then, implacable and undaunted. She'd asked her why she looked so sad.

Sometimes survival is an ugly affair, my sweet, Mother had told her. It would be years until she learned that her mother had just ordered a pass collapsed and every village beyond it abandoned to the ratlings. Too many soldiers had gone to Hannoven to aid in turning back the warbands come with spring thaw. Hundreds of Rhenians had been left to die to tooth and claw, abandoned in the cold. The thousands that would have died had the ratling made it through the pass were spared.

"Do what needs to be done, general," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said.

—

"Interesting," Amadeus said.

The others insisted on treating him like he was made of glass, yet for all that his body had become pale and sickly his mind had not dulled. Spreading an aspect across sixteen thousand soldiers – closer to fifteen now, he corrected – exhausted him to the extent he could barely stand, most days. Being carried like on a litter an invalid had been a private humiliation, though he was not one to let petty pride get in the way of necessity. He was currently more useful as a logistical asset than a field one. Still, the sweat and shivers had been an unpleasant surprise. He'd not known sickness in a very long time, and this was perhaps as close as a Named could come to it.

"We won't get to plunder a waystation twice," Scribe said. "The Circle of Thorns is recalling all assets in the region and the Silver Letters are withdrawing everything but observers."

Those two organizations were, respectively, the foreign and domestic intelligence apparatuses of the Principate. The Silver Letters occasionally also dabbled in assassination or a spot of sabotage in the past, though under Hasenbach they're curtailed those activities to Praesi agents only. He had great respect for the Circle of Thorns, personally. They were one of the most skillful and well-funded spy networks in the history of Calernia, and had been pursuing Procer's interests abroad with regular success for centuries. It also operated with only middling oversight from the throne: even at the height of the Proceran civil war, the Eyes of the Empire had been forced to fight them tooth and nail for every success in the Free Cities. Their information was, as a rule, reliable and delivered to the appropriate individuals in a timely manner. The Silver Letters, on the other hand, had been made sport of by Imperial agents for decades. They had connections with the gutter and the servants as well as the ruthlessness to properly use them, but they lacked the professional training and arcane tools the Eyes of the Empire had gained since Alaya climbed the Tower. Their internal squables had been exploited by Scribe's agents with relish, though only ever through careful intermediaries – they despised the Eyes to the bone.

"It does not matter," Amadeus finally said. "From what we have learned we can deduce more, and sooner or later we will succeed at getting our hands on royal correspondence."

The household guard of Cantal had burned their ruler's personal papers when it became evident the capital would fall, which was good and clever ser-

vice yet somewhat inconvenient to the Black Knight. He'd personally commended the captain responsible and offered the man an officer's commission in the Legions, though sadly he'd refused. Out of respect he'd allowed the captain poison instead of the blade, though the execution had been a given. Amadeus was fond of talent, yet not so fond he would leave it in the service of his foes. Grem strode into the tent moments later, parting the flap and letting in the scent of smoke and blood. Two villages had been sacked today, though legionaries had only ever marched on one. It remained a matter of great amusement to Amadeus that the Proceran campaign was yielding a greater harvest of traitors than the civil war in Praes ever had.

There was reason to it, of course. The fresh auxiliaries gained by his host were bandits who'd been at odds with local authorities long before he ever came, and who intended to melt back into the countryside with their loot the moment the Legions left. His army was seen as a passing storm here, an opportunity to be exploited. When he'd fought to put Alaya on the throne it had been with the stated intent to crush every significant Praesi power block underfoot and have them remain in that state for the foreseeable future. That he'd been a Duni backed largely by orcs and goblins in the initial stretch of the war had only added to the perception that Alaya's supporters were hungry outsiders that would throw away all old privileges and influences in order to rise. Few Praesi of authority had been willing to lend their aid to a faction so estranged from traditional avenues of power, not until it became exceedingly clear it would win the war.

"Heard you found the letters of some Proceran spies," Grem said, striding towards a seat.

The one-eyed orc glanced at him first, lips thinning in dismay. Amadeus kept his irritation off his face. He was exhausted, not dying.

"A waystation belonging to the Circle of Thorns," Eudokia specified. "The letters were meant to be carried to Salia at least a week back, but our advance disrupted the journey."

"News from abroad, then," Grem grunted. "Shame. Knowing what the Silver Letters are up to would be a great deal more useful. That's twice we ran into bandit groups fighting over succession, now, and I don't think it's a coincidence."

"Damage control by Hasenbach, most likely," Amadeus agreed. "Yet their correspondence has been... enlightening. Klaus Papenheim is on the march."

The orc's hairless brows rose.

"He's finally willing to chase us?" he said. "I didn't think his niece's position in the Assembly was that weak. Would Iserre falling really unseat her?"

"He's marching north, old friend," Amadeus said. "The letters also mentioned that an eye needed to be kept on the Stairway in case Duchess Kegan decided to raid into Arans. It was deemed unlikely – and I agree – but the implication that there was need of a watch at all is telling."

"It means Malanza's not going to be holding the pass from their end," Grem said. "That's their two largest field armies on the move."

He paused.

"*Shit*," he finally said. "You're sure?"

"We are," Eudokia said.

"Then the entire north is about to be hip-deep in dead men," Grem bluntly said. "I can't think of another reason for Hasenbach to pull out. The Iron Prince only let us burn our way through the heartlands without lifting a finger because he judged toppling Callow as quick as possible was how the war would be turned around. He wouldn't leave the Vales if he had any another choice, not after committing for so long."

"That is my assessment as well," Amadeus said. "And it means our horizons have just expanded a great deal."

"Hainaut's the longer coast, and it's a maze of cliffs and passes," Grem continued, thinking out loud. "No, Malanza won't head there. Your apprentice ripped through her officers, that army's running on fumes and fantassins. If it's spread out for coastal defence half of it will bolt when the Dead King comes out. She'll head for Cleves. It's where Keter aims for, whenever they try to land a force, and it's fortified almost as heavily as a Callowan city. She'll count on the walls to hold the army together and wait until Papenheim makes it north to contest Hainaut."

"Both those forces will not return south for years," the Black Knight said. "That leaves them conscripts and Levantines. The army in Tenerife is unlikely to budge so long as the League doesn't declare for anyone."

"The Dominions has two field armies of thirty thousand," Grem said. "I'm not worried around the one going around the lakes through Salamans, it's not going to pursue unless we tweak their nose. But if we scrap with the one that just made shore, this campaign is finished."

Amadeus had, in a rare flight of fancy, called this war an invasion when speaking to Ranker. It was not, practically speaking. No territory taken had been held, and this entire affair could more accurately be termed a large-scale raid. One pursued in a manner that would shake the First Prince's position in the Highest Assembly while also aiming to damage the Principate's ability to wage war past winter, but those were deeper strategic pursuits. Tactically, the Legions of Terror were behaving as a roving force avoiding field battles and attacking only soft positions. Raiders, by any definition. That the countryside and cities had been emptied by the massive conscription preceding the Tenth Crusade allowed Amadeus' army to draw on its comprehensive siege experience to breach and sack cities a more traditional force would avoid, but that ability should not be mistaken for actual fighting strength. If the Legions engaged a Levantine army outnumbering them twofold, even a victory would be so costly his forces would be effectively knocked out of the war. That would be the beginning of a death spiral, Amadeus knew: without the strength necessary to

forage his army would begin to starve, further slowing and weakening it until even thinned city garrisons would be enough to stamp it out.

"We know for a fact they've slowed down to a crawl," Scribe said. "Even if they began a forced march tonight we should be able to take the city of Iserre and withdraw before they arrive."

"It's a tempting target," Amadeus noted. "The food stores would keep us fed through winter easily and the treasury would allow us to significantly expand the ranks of our auxiliaries. Prince Milenan's capital was spared by the civil war: it's one of the wealthiest cities in Procer at the moment."

"My very point," Grem said. "If it's that good a prize, why is Hasenbach botching its defence so badly?"

"I suspect it is beyond her control," Scribe said. "The Dominion has expressed doubt that the terms of alliance signed cover the defence of Procer itself."

"They can't seriously expect that to hold up," the orc growled. "They'd be stabbing an ally in broad daylight. If they screw another crusader in the middle of a crusade their reputation is *dust*."

"Eudokia is of the opinion that they're shaking down the First Prince for concessions," Amadeus said. "Letting Iserre burn would make her fold quick enough, no matter her objections."

The orc's sole eye turned to him.

"And you?"

"Six months ago, the Ashuran committee liaising with the Grand Alliance formally requested access to the Thalassocracy's most accurate maps of Praes as well as the tally of trade goods compiled by its merchant captains," Amadeus said. "There can be no doubt that the signatories are already debating how best to partition Praes after the crusade. There are also known proponents of the extermination of all humans within Imperial borders in the Dominion's upper ranks, though they remain a loud minority for now. They still represent a significant portion of the Levantine armies we are facing at this very moment, which grants them leverage. The First Prince is currently losing control of the Highest Assembly, desperately in need of reinforcements to face both us and the Dead King and it's an open secret she fought against the results of the conclave in Salia and lost. If Levant was ever going to turn the screws on her for concessions, now is the time. All the stars are aligned."

"Queen Catherine is also still unaccounted for," Scribe said. "In a way she's the most immediate threat of all. She could appear on the outskirts of Salia with the entire Army of Callow, and even if the Augur warns Hasenbach in advance her armies cannot magically cross half of Procer to arrive in time. Every single plan they make has to take that under consideration."

"They can fight a better war than this," Marshal Grem One-Eye said. "I won't deny anything you said, but you both know I'm speaking the truth. There's the scent of hubris in the air, Black. I don't like it."

"So there is," Amadeus murmured. "I suppose there's only one question left to ask, then."

"And what's that?" the orc said, eye narrowed.

"Shall we roll the dice one more time, old friend?" the Carrion Lord smiled, slow and thin and utterly cold.

Bonus Chapter: Fatalism III

> "I fear the man of one book, even if that book is about the pastoral habits of the common Callowan cow. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a cow? They are a depthless abyss of cold nihilism."
>
> King Edward IV of Callow, the Sufficiently Paranoid

In the days before the founding of the Principate, Salia had been little more than the ancient tribal grounds of the Merovins. Though rich in game and copper – mined, one no longer admitted in polite company, by slaves from rival Alamans tribes – it'd been a modest village of less than five thousand. The Merovins were known as hunters and warriors, not farmers, and had preferred to raise lodges in now-cut forests rather than gather in a city-fortress as the Arlesites to the south had practiced since times immemorial. That it'd been chosen as the seat of the council that founded the Principate had been due to a potent mixture of luck and politicking by Clothor Merovins. Salia had been well placed to host the armies returned victorious from the First Crusade and the fall of Triumphant, and had represented something of a compromised between the already-squabbling factions of Alamans chiefs and Arlesites kings who both desired the council closer to their own holdings. It was a famous story that Clothor had sold all his possessions, down to his last pair of boots, to bribe the recalcitrant into agreeing.

Like so many stories on which the foundation of realms were built, it was a lie. Clothor had been one of the wealthiest men in the not-yet-Principate, having discretely stolen the Callowan tributes meant for Dread Empress Triumphant that were getting readied when the continent-wide rebellion against her reign began. Still, there was a grain of truth to the story: the man had near-beggared himself buying alliances with lavish gifts and promises, though he had kept his boots. And still Cantal had nearly been chosen at the site instead. It would be a very difference Principate that now stood, Cordelia thought, if the chieftess of Cantal had succeeded at her own intrigues. But Clothor had been both wilier and the better speaker, going on to win the contest and then the crown itself: the very first of the First Princes of Procer. One of his very first orders had been to raise what was now the Chamber of Assembly on the

grounds where the celebrated council had taken place, and it was surrounded by those centuries of history that Cordelia Hasenbach now sat.

Salia was now the largest city of Calernia: when winter came around and the labouring *manants* who'd toiled on the fields throughout spring and summer flocked to city with their seasonal wages, near nine hundred thousand souls dwelled within the boundaries of Procer's capital. The city had been turned into a work of art by First Princes and Princesses, spires and churches and sprawling gardens – some of those meant only for winter, even, built so that the frost and snow themselves would become adornments. There was ugliness as well, entire districts of huts where the peasants took sick and died in their own wastes while the wealthy partook in exotic banquets mere miles away. And yet Cordelia had found she loved Salia, for all its flaws, with the same depth she loved the Rhenia of her birth. It was a city unlike any other on the continent, the ever-beating heart of an empire that risen from nothing to stand above all realms that saw the sun. Where else could one find Arlesite poet-duellists declaiming in contest with Alamans lay brothers in gardens that depicted different acts of a play with every season? Or grim-faced Lycaonese veterans trading drinks and war stories with fantassins who'd served in wars halfway across the continent?

The wealth of Salia was in the people, not the coin or the facades, and it was a rare day where the First Prince of Procer did not wake humbled that they had been placed in her care.

Yet in that sprawling, glorious and riotous mess there was one place of utter stillness. One that had not changed since the savage days of Procer's founding, where it had been hard men and women wearing furs and stolen riches – never without a blade, even when bathing – who had changed the world: the Chamber of Assembly, seat of the Highest Assembly of the Principate. The walls were naught but whitewashed limestone, the rafters were ancient oak that creaked when touched and the chamber had carried a faint scent of wood smoke ever since the palace around it caught fire during the second Liturgical War. A halfway-skillful merchant would own finer hall than this after a decade's work, and yet never once had the royalty of Procer asked the chamber should be built anew or replaced. For within there stood twenty-four thrones, none younger than six centuries. One for every principality in the realm, dragged from all over the Principate to stand forever in this room. Princes and princesses ruled from palaces all over Procer, but there was only one Chamber and one Highest Assembly: the words spoken in this smoky hall resounded to every corner of Calernia.

Cordelia's own seat was the same that had been set by Clothor Merovins himself. A spit of grey granite polished by the waters of the lake it'd been dredged from, without even a back to lean against. Cunning Clothor was said to have mourned before all that he'd emptied his treasury so deeply bestowing gifts upon his allies he could not even afford to have a proper throne carved. The blonde prince rather admired the man who'd been her earliest predecessor.

A great warlord, yes, but one of the rare examples of that breed who'd understood the worth of the softer ways of statecraft. Many kings and chiefs came to that council with thrones that now stood before her, gilded and set with jewels or made of enchanted stones and rare trees from the Waning Woods. Yet Clothor Merovins' humble spit of granite was the only one that stood on a dais, an inch higher than all the others. In truth, two seats in the chamber rightfully belonged to Cordelia. The same she now sat, and another far to the back.

One of the triplet thrones of Rhenia, Hannoven and Bremen, famously carved from the same pale chalkstone on which First Princess Frederonne Merovins had wed the Prince of Hannoven, sealing her conquest of the Lycaonese principalities by twining bloodlines. Her own father had died assaulting the walls of Rhenia, where even after the fall of every other Lycaonese principality the hosts had held out with desperate defiance, but Frederonne had shown enough foresight to predict that fighting the Lycaonese to the bitter end would leave her own people to defend against the Plague and the Dead in their stead. Cordelia's Rhenian throne was covered by a silk banner displaying the Hasenbach heraldry of crowned bronze mountain peak on deep blue, signifying that she had named no sworn delegate and still held the voting rights for the principality. The technical matter was complex, and relied on the legal fiction that she was two different people: the Prince of Rhenia, her birthright, and the Princess of Salia which was a title bound to the greater one of First Prince. Before the last of the Merovins died the principality of Salia had been its own realm and remained under their rule even when one not of their bloodline was First Prince, though the ruler of Procer had right of administration over the city, by custom.

It had been over a hundred years since then, however, and Cordelia had come to benefit from the additional vote and attendant legalities more than she'd ever expected she would.

"The assembly recognizes *l'assermenté* for Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre," the Master of Orders announced, thickly-accented Lycaonese voice perfectly pronouncing the Old Chantant term.

The white-haired Master was one of her own Rhenians, one with a talent for languages she'd put into place within a month of ascending the throne. In this battlefield of courtesies and ceremonies, there were few advantages more precious than an arbiter of ceremonies entirely loyal to her. Cordelia's eyes blue eyes flicked at the sworn delegate of Iserre, one of Prince Amadis' seemingly never-ending parade of kinsmen of middling talent. Olivier Milenan was young, barely in his twenties, and handsome in much the same way as his very distant uncle. Not the sharpest of intriguers, this one, though hardly slow. She suspected he'd been chosen by Amadis largely because while of princely blood Olivier's branch of the family was impoverished and so the sum entire of his fortunes rested on the goodwill of his crowned kinsman. This one would not cross his uncle, lest he got back to rotting in the gutted mansion where he'd been raised in utter obscurity. Rising to his feet, Olivier Milenan straightened

his back.

"By ancient oath, I speak only the words of my prince and none other," he said.

"You were heard by these hallowed grounds," the Master of Orders replied. "Let no lie mar your tongue, no heresy your soul and may the Heavens grant you righteous purpose in this exchange of words."

Every individual in the chamber save those two repeated the sentences with practiced cadence. As First Prince, Cordelia was exempt from such proceedings. As Prince of Rhenia, she was not. Other royals were few in attendance, in this particular session. The rulers Creusens, Orense and Valencis had graced the capital with their presence, as well as her old ally the Prince of Brus, yet every other was a sworn delegate. It mattered little: their instructions would be royal, if not their bearing.

"My countrymen," Olivier Milenan spoke, his voice well-trained and pleasant to the ear, "I stand before you today to speak of grave matters. The Principate has upheld its duties to Creation and undertaken the waging of just war against the wicked crowns of the East, yet in doing so a heavy price has been exacted. While our armies manoeuvre and quibble, Dread Empress Malicia's hungriest hound pillages and rapes his way through our realm heedlessly. Already Cantal has suffered such depredations, and now my own native Iserre seems destined for the same savage fate."

It had not taken long, Cordelia mused, for the first instruction of the Master of Orders to be disregarded – *let no lie mar your tongue*. The Carrion Lord's horde of murderous vagrants might be looting everything granary in sight, but they at least observed their own regulations: rapists and murderers were hung. The man's rhetorical flourishes were not of great import, though what would follow them was. The First Prince had already deduced the gist of the motion the man would present. She had, after all, a letter addressed to a bastard among her papers. It was the number of those willing to support the motion that truly mattered. This was the first formal session held since the defeats in Callow, though half a dozen informal ones had taken place. The important difference between the two was that in a formal session, any motion put to the First Prince would enter the public records. Including the votes and if her personal Right of Refusal was used afterwards. That she would be driven to that was unlikely, as she should still have enough support they would fail to secure a majority, but it was possible for her and her allies to be forced to vote in a manner that would damage their reputation with the people. *If you have the votes to corner me, Milenan*, she thought. *Do you?*

"Our cities are empty, our fortresses gather dust," Olivier orated, voice resounding. "Why? Because we have sent our soldiers to war, observing the decree of our anointed First Prince. Do not mistake this for intriguing, my friends, for none stand more loyal to Her Most Serene Highness than the braves of Iserre. I merely weep for the fate of my people, who must wither and die even as their valiantly crusading cousins stand leashed and impotent mere weeks of

march away. Where is the Iron Prince, I ask you? What right does the Prince of Hannoven have to part kin from besieged kin by such cruel decree?"

There were murmurs of approval at that. Uncle Klaus had never been popular down south, in part because he'd led her armies in their crushing of theirs yet also because he himself made no mystery that he held most of them in contempt. His decision – though it had been presented as hers – to let the Legions of Terror march into Procer without pursuit had only deepened the enmity. The sworn delegate from Bremen loudly spat on the floor, scarred face purple with anger, much to the distaste of the closest southerners. Uncle Klaus had carried her crippled cousin back through five leagues of marshlands under ratling pursuit after a skirmish went south, Cordelia knew. If blades were allowed into the chamber, she might very well have drawn. The Iron Prince was misliked here, but he was fiercely loved by his own people.

"The Prince of Iserre asks not for glory or reward, though for this realm he has greatly bled," Olivier said. "He only asks for loyalty to be repaid in kind, and the heart of Procer to be protected from the foul works of the Praesi. Iserre motions for a formal petition to be presented to the First Prince, requesting that the army under the command of Prince Klaus Papenheim be tasked with the defense of Procer itself."

Cordelia kept her face unruffled. The choice of a petition petition had been a clever trick of procedure, she had to admit, and one that'd surprised her. Milenan was within his rights to make a direct request to the First Prince, though not a demand – the Principate had joined a crusade, which meant she had supreme authority over all armed men and any attempting to wrest it from her would be committing treason. Would that her opponents were such fools. If it had been a direct request, every delegate and royal casting their vote in favour of it would be effectively declaring they had lost faith in her ability to prosecute this war. In the middle of a crusade, that would be costly to their popularity at home as the people's mood had grown distinctly vengeful. A petition to request, on the other hand, would produce a formal document open to any attending sitter's signature that would be presented to her after the session. The vote over the motion itself would not be added to the record, keeping the implicit rebuke to her entirely private.

It was clever in the sense that it allowed principalities neither in her camp nor Prince Amadis' to express their dissatisfaction: they could back the motion to have the petition, then withhold their signature on the document. Young Olivier had been busy in his uncle's service, she realized, and moreso than she had thought. He'd never have presented the motion if he did not believe it would pass. *And when that petition is made passed along to every prince in Procer,* Cordelia thought, *which we both know you will do, the unity of your uncle's own faction will be brought in contrast with my own dying alliances.* With a single act he was forcing her to publicly deny a petition that would be very popular in certain parts of her realm, wounded her prestige in the Highest Assembly and signaled to fence-sitters it might be time to place their coin on

the horse pulling ahead. Alamans intrigue at is finest, this: three birds with a single stone, all headed for the thrower's own kitchen. How best to strangle this, then, before the blow caused a bruise?

"The assembly recognizes *l'assermentée* for Prince Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal," the Master of Orders announced.

The sworn delegate, her dress and apparel perfect to the extent that even Cordelia could only be admiring, inclined her head respectfully before speaking.

"The Prince of Cantal seconds the motion to petition the First Prince, and moves for immediate vote over it," she simply said.

Striking swift, was it? They *had* succeeded at arranging this under her nose, but assuming victory could be won by simple haste was rather bold of them. The Master of Orders glanced at her and she cleared her throat. His eyes went down to her lap, where he found her hands folded primly.

"The assembly recognizes the Prince of Rhenia," he smoothly said.

There was a ripple at that. The three Lycaonese in the back wore open smiles, and her old comrade Prince Frederic of Brus was leaning forward eagerly.

"The Principality of Rhenia thirds the presented motion," she smiled calmly. "Moreover, it requests for both the vote and preceding address to be entered into the formal public record."

A glint of amusement passed in the Master of Orders' rheumy eyes.

"As per law, such a request can only be granted by the First Prince of Procer," he said. "I now put the question to Her Most Serene Highness, First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia."

Cordelia inclined her head.

"I grant the request," she simply said.

The blonde prince felt every eye in the room turn to her. Faces had blanked, eyes gone thoughtfully. Even Olivier Amadis had been visibly taken aback before mastering himself and was now staring at her warily. *Wonder now, boy*, she thought. *What I know that you do not.* Uncle Klaus was preparing for a march north even as session was held, after all. Let the record show Amadis Milenan's own nephew dragging his name through the mud even as the Iron Prince gathered supplies for his march to turn back the Dead King. Let every single one of these vultures be named as the handful that would abandon all of northern Procer to salvage their granaries. *Scrape me raw if you dare, Milenan. I am willing to lose a little skin if in exchange I can have you and your fellows flayed in song in every tavern from Rhenia to Tenerife by the year's end. The men who sold Procer. It has a ring to it, does it not?* She met the boy eyes and smiled pleasantly.

"Shall we proceed with the vote?" she asked.

Her gaze swept the rest of the room. *And now we find out what worth are the bargains you made, Olivier. Will they stick with you, when they smell a trap? There is no one in this room unware that he who rides the Ebb must beware of the Flow.* Her prompting added to the sworn delegate from Cantal's had

made it inevitable vote would immediately follow before any further discussion could be had. The Master of Orders called on the thrones in sequence, and it was an effort for Cordelia's face not to grow grim. Most of the supporters were expected. Iserre, Cantal, Orne, Creusens, Segovia and Aequitan. Prince Amadis and his closest supporters, those who had been defeated at the Battle of the Camps and were well aware that if the Iserran cause sunk they would soon follow it into the depths. Bayeux she'd expected as well, as parts of its countryside had been torched by the Carrion Lord. Orense, however, was an unpleasant surprise. She had saved its evidently ingrate prince from brutal Levantine raids barely more than a year ago. How quickly gratitude turned to naught. The sworn delegate from Valencis hesitated before abstaining, which was telling. If not for her ploy that would have been another vote in favour. Eight in favour, out of twenty four votes, and it could very easily have been nine. How many others had simply hidden their late change of heart more skillfully?

The motion failed, and she had scored a wound that would not show for months yet, but she could feel the wind turning. The matter of the coming conclave needed to be squashed, lest today's abstentions become tomorrow's knives.

—

Cordelia was not one to easily discard etiquette. Rules were the birthing bed of civilization: common foundation could only be found when people agreed on the most essential standards of behaviour. Etiquette was merely the regulation of relationships between individuals, and while it could be used to oppress it could also be used to free. Rules always cut both ways

Yet if there was one particular set she could grind into dust, it was the stringent courtesies governing audience between the Holies and the First Prince of Procer. It was a throwback of the Liturgical Wars, one no ruler of Procer had every felt quite secure enough to revisit. She was ushered into the Starlit Cloister by a handful of sisters who had taken vows of silence, her personal guard forced to remain outside, and led to a private garden. There she was guided in removing her dress and regalia before submitting to hour-long ablutions that left her without a single speck of artifice. Even her hair was unbraided, made to course down her shoulders without the slightest of stylings. It was wearing a white shift unflattering to her Hasenbach frame and barefoot that a brother finally sought her out, bowing low before informing her she was to be received.

The entire process was said to be symbolic, a stripping of earthly trappings before she could be allowed to speak with souls untainted by such matters. Cordelia herself was of the opinion that the point of the exercise was to humble the ruler of Procer and disarray them before taking them into the very seat of power of the Holies. It was a gauntlet of rather unsubtle pressure, and one she resented. The Holies, after all, were a purely Proceran notion: an assembly of the leading priests of the House of Light's basilicas and cathedrals, with a smatter of administrators and highborn lay people added to the mix-

ture. Still, unpleasant as this was it was a necessary unpleasantness. While the Holies might not wield authority in any official sense – their very existence was informal, and the requirements for counting among their number opaque to any outside of the House of Light – their influence assured that anything they agreed on would miraculously become policy shortly afterwards.

They must be convinced, at all costs.

The corpulent brother guiding her did so through a handful of sunlit corridors before pausing before a thick oaken gate. He bowed once more, observing the required angle perfectly, and left without a word. Cordelia allowed herself the weakness of a moment's rest to gather her bearings. She silently marshalled her arguments, brought to mind faces and names and associated interests. They could be moved, as all men could be moved. Through the wood she heard a spatter of female laughter and the sound of cup being dropped, brow rising in response. Her hand rose to the heavy iron ring on the door, knocking thrice before pulling. The absence of a footpad to serve that purpose in her stead was yet another petty little test for any seeking audience. The door creaked open, and immediately Cordelia's face stilled. She'd had audience with the Holies only once before, shortly before her coronation, and this was not the ornate hall where she had then been received.

It was instead a cramped arched dining room, filled with only a long table and a handful of seats. In the back a woman was leaning her seat so far back half the legs were off the floor, feet resting atop the table. She was old, skin creased and her forehead mottled with spots under a braid of stark white hair. The eyes, though, the eyes were sharp. Dark and patient.

"Good evening, Your Highness," the Saint of Swords nonchalantly call out.

Her mind spun. She'd set out aiming to find out which of the Chosen had demanded the conclave, and already she had her answer. She absent-mindedly noted a handful of details in quick succession – there were two cups, not one, and one had been toppled. It'd spilled liquor all over the table. The other goblet was in the hands of the heroine, inclined at an angle that allowed her to recognize water within. They were alone in the room, the only other door behind the Saint, and the chandeliers casting light allowed moving shadows to be cast into the corners.

"Laurence de Montfort," Cordelia calmly replied, inclining her head by the barest of fractions. "An unexpected pleasure. I was led to believe I would be addressing the Holies."

"I sent them away for a walk," the heroine still known in Procer as the Regicide shrugged. "This is a talk for adults, not squabbling children."

Most royalty in her position, Cordelia thought, would be wondering if they were about to be carved up. She knew better. There were matters in which the First Prince did not trust the judgement of her uncle – tax policy, trade, putting his seal to a budget that did not overwhelmingly favour the army – but he was a very sharp judge of character. *A hard woman*, he'd said of the Saint, *but she always means well.* The blonde prince claimed a seat at the opposite end of

the table without waiting for an invitation. The Chosen was not the host, here, only another guest.

"I take it this conclave is your work," Cordelia said, settling down and forcing herself to ignore the unpleasant itch of her shift against her skin. "Should I expect the Grey Pilgrim to join us as well?"

"Tariq's busy skinning of the many cats making a racket in your backyard," the old woman dismissed. "I'll be following him as soon as this business is finished."

"And what business would that be, exactly?" she asked. "Your reputation does not mention an interest in statecraft."

The Saint of Swords set down her cup on the table, then dragged her legs down. Her chair returned to the stone floor with a sharp clack.

"I find I am disappointed in you, Cordelia Hasenbach," the Regicide said. "You're promising in a lot of ways, I won't deny. You're taking a hatchet to the rot, however politely, and you've been herding the crowned wolves well enough. But this? You should know better. You're Lycaonese. You know the Enemy's face."

Cordelia cocked her head to the side, keeping the pretence of calm in truth rapidly leaving her.

"Not merely the conclave," she deduced. "It is your own notion to have the Black Queen named Arch-heretic of the East."

The old woman grinned harshly.

"They were eager enough, truth be told," the Saint said. "Just needed a little push. That I needed to give it at all is what got me in such a meddling mood. You're flinching, Hasenbach. You've been down here too long, the iron's beginning to rust."

The First Prince's lips thinned. It had been a very long time since she'd been offered such blatant disrespect.

"You know less than you think," she said.

"'Ol King Bones is stirring, you mean," the Chosen replied.

Cordelia's fingers tightened in her lap, a rare lapse of control on her part. How did she know? Had the Heavens whispered the secret in her ear? No, it did not matter. If she *did* know, why would she act so recklessly?

"You should be aware, then, that further prosecuting the war against Callow is unwise," the First Prince said. "War on two fronts is foolish at the best of times. War on two fronts when one is the Kingdom of the Dead is *lunacy*. We cannot start a life and death struggle with the Black Queen when the marching dead gather north. It will be the ruin of the Principate, Saint. No amount of miracles can make hosts fight two battles simultaneously."

"You mean," Laurence de Montfort said softly, "to make truce with the Enemy. Listen to yourself, girl. Your ancestors would cut your bloody throat for this."

"My ancestors were guarding a handful of passes and crossings," Cordelia sharply replied. "I am charged with the entirety of Procer, and my failure would

mean the slaughter of millions. I would rather be censured by the blind dead than watch the risen kind butcher half the Principate. You are gambling with the lives of more people than you have ever seen, Saint. What worth will your soft sentences be, when the Army of Callow falls on our flank and Keter devours the rest?"

"You don't understand what this is, do you?" the Saint smiled. "This is not the War of the Grand Alliance or the second invasion of Callow. It's the *Tenth Crusade*. You slapped the gauntlet down, girl, and now Below's picking it up. There is no compromise to be had anymore, no subtle manoeuvering. You declared war on the Hellgods, and the sword will not return to the sheath until one side falls."

"A crusade can be waged intelligently," the First Prince said. "It must, or it will fail like those before it."

"That's where you misunderstand," the Saint amiably said. "You think all of this. . . "

Her hand moved to encompass their surroundings.

"Is inviolable," she continued. "It's an understandable weakness. You rule here, after all, and love for your people is no sin. But everything dies, Cordelia Hasenbach. Even empires."

The blond woman paled.

"This is treason," she coldly said. "As good as a confession you seek the destruction of the Principate."

"This whole damned house is *rotten to the bone*, girl," the Saint said. "You've toiled and troubled and fought like lion, but it'll die with you. You know that already, deep down. Maybe the Principate was what it should be, ages ago, but it has not been in a very long time. It's greed and power and lies, hungry wars and treachery made into the mortar of palaces. The sickness is all it knows, now."

"You are mad," Cordelia spoke in a hushed whisper. "Gods Above, your mind has gone and you would take all of us with it."

"Oh, we'll bleed," the Saint mused. "We'll lose *badly*, at first. And then we'll claw our way back up, inch by inch. Evil always wins at the start, but it's us who owns the conclusion. And from the ruins something better will rise. This empire's already a corpse, but we'll send it off with a pyre glorious enough it'll redeem the old faults."

"I will have you arrested," the First Prince of Procer said. "I will have you killed, if that is what it takes."

"You just worry about getting the armies marching," Laurence de Montfort dismissed. "Odds are I won't survive the scrap, but that's all right. It's a good war to die in. It'll be the crusade that settles it, you see: too many old monsters came crawling out on both sides. Won't be the kind of losses a side can recover from."

"You are not listening to a word I say," Cordelia whispered, aghast.

The Saint of Swords rose to her feet jauntily. The First Prince's muscles clenched, though she managed to flinch when the Chosen approached her. The old woman clapped her shoulder.

"Keep your chin up, girl," she said. "Sacrifice is always ugly business, but we'll come through in the end. To rise from the ashes, there needs to be a fire first."

The Saint of Swords strolled out, boots slapping against the stone, and the sound of the door closing behind her was the death cry of an era.

Interlude: Zwischenzug

> "Of course I fear my friends. If they did not scare me, why befriend them at all?"
>
> Dread Empress Prudence the First, the Frequently Vanquished

When dawn came to Laure it found Vivienne Dartwick already awake. She'd slept only fitfully on her too-soft bed, the sparse hours of rest broken by regular reports from her Jacks. Now that she'd returned to the capital she was like the spider returned to her web, her thieves and spies passing forward a river of whispers she had not understood how badly she missed before she could drink from it again. It'd been two months since she had last spoken with Catherine, time and distance watering her wine. She still believed most of what she'd said, but the dire state of affairs here had forced her to admit her queen had not been wrong in her predictions: neither she nor Adjutant had been able to afford a full night's sleep since they stepped out of Arcadia. The orc was a work horse like no one she had ever met, yet she knew that if he'd been forced to handle the Jacks as well as the rest he would have buckled under the weight.

Sunlight passed through the open panes of her window as she sat in silence, two scrolls unfurled before her. Neither were pleasant news. Dread Empress Malicia had sent a diplomatic envoy under truce banner and the man was reported to be riding for Laure with all possible haste. His affairs had been looked through, and he carried no letter or instructions. Whatever the Empress wanted to be said would be spoke in person. Reluctantly, Vivienne had passed along orders for the envoy to be allowed use of courier horses and escorted by soldiers from the Summerholm garrison. The second scroll was a matter beyond her own purview to settle. After refugees began pouring into Callow through the Blessed Isle, Catherine had ordered for the farmers of the eastern fields to withdraw back to Summerholm with their grain and cattle. There had been concerns that if the city garrison sallied out to force the refugees back into the Empire it would be walking into a Praesi ambush.

The farmers and villagers closest to Summerholm had obeyed. Those closer to Praesi borders, however, were digging in their heels. They were refusing their abandon their possessions to the inevitable looting from the refugees but lacked the means to carry them westward, and so they'd refused to leave en-

tirely. Already there had been strife between Callowans and refugees, and over a dozen deaths. It would only get worse, Vivienne knew. More refugees would come, and some would carry weapons. Callowan farmers would empty their cellars of dusty old spears and swords to fight for their land and property, and the killings would escalate. The Praesi were sure exploit the mounting fears and either arm or send troops to help their countrymen. Vivienne's own countrymen would die, and not a damned thing would be done about it. Marshal Juniper, she knew, would be adamant it was not worth risking the garrison to protect farmers who'd refused to obey a royal decree.

There was only one man in the kingdom who could force her, and Hakram Deadhand was not known to smile upon those who disobeyed his mistress.

Vivienne passed a hand through her hair, noting it was beginning to grow long again. She'd need to have it cut soon enough, and it sent a private pang of fear in her that this was the case. The thief had worked with quite a few Named, since the Liesse Rebellion, and she had not known any of them to have such issues. The largest physical change she'd seen in someone with a Role was Masego's noticeable loss of weight after the Observatory was raised – and given that the man had often forgotten to eat unless Indrani saw to it, the explanation was clear. The Hierophant had been wasting away chasing his visions, his thinning had been as much a reflection of that as his lack of meals. What did it mean, that her hair still grew and she tired almost as easily as when she'd been young? She'd never observed the same in any of the Named she'd known. The thought that she might lose her aspects, or even her Name itself, had been the fodder of persistent nightmares.

She was already dead weight as a Named, what would she be without even that?

Vivienne forced herself to breathe in and breathe out slowly, the old calming trick her thief master had taught her when he first took her roof-hopping. Yet she could only think of the pain, oh the pain when the lightning had coursed through her body. Of the searing green heat that engulfed her under the cold gaze of the Duke of Green Orchards. Of the flames that had licked at her body hungrily in the depths of the Doom of Liesse, cracking the gums of her teeth and scorching her tongue. A parade of pain, and what did she have but failures to contrast them with? *How many of my victories were truly mine?* Her hand was trembling with the answer, and the knowledge that followed – all of her defeats had been of her own making. Vivienne snarled and formed a fist with trembling fingers, hitting at the table.

"I will catch up," she whispered, knuckles throbbing with pain. "I *will*."

She breathed in, breathed out. The tremors had not left, but lazing about would not chase them away. She had had yet another losing fight to pick. She left the scrolls behind and left her rooms, grabbing the first palace servant she came across and ordering him to pass the message that Marshal Juniper was summoned to a council in the formal room at Morning Bell. Vivienne had no intention of spending time trading barbed words with the Hellhound as would

inevitably ensue if she went herself to seek out the recently-arrived Marshal of Callow. The other whose attendance would be required, though, she would fetch herself. They'd not traded words in three days save through correspondences, their differing duties and long hours precluding the shared meals that Catherine insisted on the Woe having when she was there to enforce it. Honestly compelled the thief to admit she would not have taken occasion to have one even if there had been one. She'd warmed to some of the Woe more than she had ever thought she would. Masego and Indrani she even counted as friends of a sort, a notion that would have appalled her a few years ago.

She had no such conflicting feelings over Hakram Deadhand.

Adjutant was not difficult to find. The cramped and crooked room that had once belonged to some royal scribe was the orc's office, and he did not leave it unless he was needed for council or court. He must sleep in there, if he even slept. The only distraction the Jacks had found he indulged in were occasional visits from his subordinate Captain Tordis. The other orc's presence, when not required by reports, was followed by the door being locked and the captain emerging with her hair ruffled and her neck red around an hour afterwards. No other such visitors had been noted, which ran against Adjutant's reputation for promiscuity. Vivienne suspected her was simply too tired and busy to chase skirts, even those made of mail. The door to the officer was cracked open, light filtering from inside. Neither candles, as Callowans preferred to use, not the finicky magelights the Praesi were so fond of. A handful of common sprites in bottles, spread around the room. Vivienne found the soft glow of them almost soothing as she rapped her knuckle against the door before opening it entirely. The orc was leaning over his desk, brows creased as he moved his quill against parchment with almost unnatural precision. He finished penning his sentence and blew the ink dry before looking up.

"Thief," Adjutant said, nodding in welcome. "Didn't think you'd still be up."

"It will be Morning Bell within an hour," Vivienne replied, then gestured at the seat across him. "May I?"

"Go ahead," he replied, sounding surprised. "Gods, morning already? I could have sworn it was barely half a bell past midnight."

The thief carefully picked up the handful of parchment sheaths left to pile on the seat, glimpsing a grain reserve tally left mostly open among them, and set them down on the floor. She dropped down into the chair, already wary. She forced herself not to look at his hand of bones, to not remember the sensation of it wrapping around her throat and *squeezing*.

"You look tired," Deadhand gently said, fangs clicking inside his maw. "Don't work yourself to death."

"You're hardly one to talk," Vivienne said, painting a smile.

The kindly visage of the concerned friend, the shoulder all the Woe could lean on. That was to be his face today, then. It was one of many. Catherine's dutiful steward and second, smoothing away every wrinkle. The laughing accomplice, trading jibes and jabs with the lowliest of soldiers. The terrifying

giant of muscle and steel, roaring as he tore apart foes with fang and axe. The soft-spoken, cold-eyed thing that had told her mild as milk he would snap her neck if she even considered treachery. *Which is your real face? Are any of them true?* She did not look at the bones. *Dead the hand and dead the man*, the song went. She could not put it out of her head.

"I've set an hour or two aside for the purpose next month," he drily said. "I take it there's a reason for the pleasure of your company?"

"I've word from the Jacks," she said. "The situation east is worsening and something needs to be done before it comes to a head. I've called a council with Marshal Juniper."

"Hopefully Aisha will have gotten some tea into her before she arrives," Adjutant grimaced, baring teeth like ivory knives.

She'd seen them rip into throats, more than once. Gobble down blood and flesh greedily like it was the finest of delicacies. The quickening in her pulse she kept away from her eyes, having learned from Akua Sahelian's example. Diabolist had not quite managed to hide how wary she was of the orc, and though the shade's discomfiture would usually have put a smile on her face Vivienne had been too dismayed to be sharing any opinion with the Butcher of Liesse to take any joy from it. *Snakes know one another*, she'd thought back then. Akua Sahelian was studying the Woe carefully, forging herself into a person they would allow themselves to like, but she'd found another had struck long before her. No wonder the shade feared him: she'd found a man whose face was as changeable as her own patiently watching her. And unlike Diabolist, Vivienne doubted there was anyone alive who knew what Hakram Deadhand truly wanted. The orc leaned back into his seat, rolling his shoulders and loudly cracking his neck with a little exhale of pleasure.

"I could eat," Adjutant said. "Probably should, too. Care to join me on a trip to the kitchens?"

"I already ate," she lied without batting an eye. "Though don't let me stop you."

She could think of few things she desired less than watching that maw at work from across a mere table's width.

"You should get something warm in you," the orc advised, rising to his feet. "You look like death warmed over. Indrani forgot some of her tea leaves in her room, I believe. I'll ask a servant to brew you a pot for the council. Formal room?"

Vivienne agreed with a silent nod. She was not surprised he'd noticed her fondness for Indrani's brews. Those dark eyes missed nothing and forgot even less. They parted ways two corridors further down, and she could not leave soon enough.

—

"So the farmers with spears are fighting the refugees with knives," Marshal Juniper grunted. "There's a surprise: there'd a damned reason they were recalled to Summerholm. The sole ingredient in that stew is desperation."

Staff Tribune Bishara had not, in fact, gotten some tea into the Hellhound before she arrived. The orc's particularly fine mood stood testament to this fact. The Marshal of Callow was of the opinion that she should be overseeing the training camps filled with fresh recruits from all across the kingdom, not cooling her heels at the capital, and had spared no pains in expression that opinion to all those even remotely involved. Adjutant was taking her spleen with at least the semblance of good humour. The constant gruff whining scraped Vivienne's nerves raw, especially when paired with the outcome she already knew was in motion.

"The farmers are defending their lands from looters," she sharply replied. "As is their right."

"Starving looters," Deadhand mildly said. "I doubt there's any great enmity or deep scheme to it. They're cold and hungry people, not a marauding army."

"Leave this alone long enough, and that's exactly what it'll turn into," Vivienne warned. "Blood has been spilled. They'll band together for the safety in numbers, and so will Callowans to deal with it. By the turn of the month it will be skirmishes all across the river banks."

"There wouldn't be corpses on the floor if they'd obeyed Foundling's fucking decree," Marshal Juniper bluntly said. "Which was meant to avoid this very outcome, if you'll remember. Last I checked someone had crowned her Queen of Callow. I'm no jurist, but I was under the impression ignoring royal decrees was some kind of treason."

She's Queen of Callow, not some eastern tyrant or a damned greenskin warlord, Vivienne thought, fingers tightening under the table. *Our rulers know there's limits to what they can order and reasonably expect to have obeyed.* It was a losing fight, as she'd known from the start. Neither of these two bore any love for the land they'd been charged with ruling, or the people born to it.

"There's no need to go quite that far," Adjutant said. "As Thief noted, all their actions save for ignoring the recall are legal under Callowan law. It would be a mistake to paint all that followed with the same brush as that initial mistake."

Deadhand the diplomat, now: half the friend, half the officer. Vivienne had not wanted the responsibility of the regency of Callow and found the burden of it suffocating, but the way the title seemed to be left at the door in their eyes remained galling. The difference between the authority in name and the authority in truth had grown to worry her, not for what it was but for what it might become. Catherine had come to the throne lawlessly, but that lawlessness could not keep lest the kingdom come apart at the seams. *A few years of this*, she thought, *and it will be one law for those with swords and another for those without.* If that came to be, the kingdom would burst like an overripe fruit without even need for an invasion. Callowans had long been under Imperial rule, but they were beginning to wake to the old freedoms. Hatred of Procer and Praes was keeping the peace for now, yet how long would that last?

"A decree's a decree," Marshal Juniper growled. "We start making excuses for everyone and this falls apart."

"If you start hanging farmers for defending their land, *excuses* will be the last of your worries," the thief coldly said. "They are not beast of burdens, to be browbeaten into the latest whim and whipped if they do not immediately obey."

The orc's maw opened, baring a row of sharp fangs. Vivienne forced her shoulders to loosen, affecting nonchalance. Perhaps even contempt. *Show her fear, give her an inch, and it will be the end of you*, she thought.

"You brought this to us," Adjutant spoke before the other could. "And I'm glad you did. Have you already thought of a measure to remedy the issue?"

Always so smooth, so measured. Too perfect. It made her skin crawl. It was no mystery, why she could not make herself trust this one while she'd come to rely on a Praesi warlock and a vicious pupil of the Lady of the Lake. *Masego cannot curb his tongue nor his face and Indrani has never been anything but brutally honest of her indifference to the suffering of others.*

"The reason for their recalcitrance to leave is simple," she said. "They will not abandon their possessions to looters but lack any method of bringing them west of they leave. If the means are provided, the matter will be largely settled."

"Not much road in that region, save for the Imperial highway," Marshal Juniper said, eyes narrowing. "You can't just requisition merchant wagons from Summerholm, the axles will break in rough country."

"The garrison of Summerholm has a large complement Legion-issue supply carts," Vivienne said. "All reinforced with good steel."

"No," the Hellhound immediately said. "That's out of the question. I will not allow military equipment to be doled out to farmers. Anyone could seize them."

"I did not mean for them to be spelled away into the countryside miraculously," she replied scathingly. "The garrison would be escorting the carts. The presence of soldiers will put an end to the skirmishes immediately, which should quicken the process enough the risks will be minimal."

"You must have been struck on the ear in Keter," Marshal Juniper growled. "I just gave you your answer. If I'm unwilling to risk carts why would you think I'm willing to risk the force holding the east?"

"It does not hold the east," Vivienne said through gritted teeth, "it watches from tall walls as the entire eastern stretch slowly goes up in blood and flames."

"All it takes is for Aksum or a pack of lesser lordships to see the garrison coming and we could lose the entire garrison to an ambush," the Hellhound said slowly, as if addressing an idiot. "They have mages, Dartwick. They have household troops and devils. The Empire's interior has been left entirely untouched by the Ashuran raids, they're fresh and at full strength. If the garrison force is gone, they can push forward to Summerholm and there's fuck all we can do about it. Half my army is spread across training camps and the rest guarding the Vales. If the enemy move quick enough, we could actually lose Summerholm itself. Walls mean nothing without men on them. All of this, for

a pack of bloody farmers who refused a direct order and are now facing the eminently predictable consequences of that refusal."

"Not your army, Hellhound," the thief said softly. "The *Army of Callow*. Sworn to protect its people, not just turn back invasions or war abroad."

"I know the godsdamned name," Marshal Juniper snarled. "The queen of the place put me in charge of it. You sure you want to have a pissing contest over that? I don't think you'll like the results."

"Enough," Adjutant said.

The voice rang with power. Not quite Speaking, Vivienne thought, yet not too far from it. She'd never mastered that trick herself, but she'd seen Catherine employ it. Felt the ripples shudder through everyone, the air heavy like just before a storm struck. The Black Queen rarely used the tool, but when she did the casual display of power was always terrifying. The way she could snatch the will of anyone in earshot as easy as snapping her fingers, bludgeoning them into obedience with weight and power. Adjutant did not have the talent, and for that Vivienne thanked whatever Gods were listening. It was already terrifying enough to remember he'd been able to fight her before even claiming his Name. Every single conversation they held was tinted by the knowledge that the orc was now in the fullness of his power, capable of tearing apart lords of the fae. He could rip out her throat with but a moment's effort and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

"This bickering helps no one," Deadhand said. "Juniper, there is a difference between having a rough tongue and pouring scorn. One is your character. The other has no place in this room, or in conversation with people who *outrank* you."

The Hellhound lips thinned.

"There was no-"

Adjutant barked out a sentence in Kharsum, too swift and heavily accented for her to understand most of it. The words for oil and fires stood out, and the Marshal of Callow closed her maw with a loud click of fangs. She no longer spoke. Vivienne's eyes remained on the other orc, wondering if she should be expressing her warm gratitude for Deadhand deigning to step in. She found little of that in her heart. The Hellhound's open hostility was nothing new, and this did absolutely nothing to mend it.

"Juniper isn't wrong about the risks," Adjutant finally said, voice calm again.

Another losing fight lost, Vivienne bitterly thought. They did not trust her or her judgement. The worst part of it was that she could see why they did not. What had she achieved with the Jacks that required a Name, that could not be done by another spymistress? How had she proved herself the equal of the infamous Black Queen or dauntless Archer, of an orc celebrated in song or a mage who spat in the eye of lesser gods? She'd been enemies with these two, not so long ago. And even then it'd been William who took the hand now made of bones, while she'd been tossed through a window like a sack of radishes by an

offhand spell. *I do not belong here,* she thought, the warm memories of laughter by the fire seeming so far away. She did not belong at this table, arguing over the fate of her people and losing inch by inch. She'd joined Catherine for more than this, hadn't she? For something beyond Imperial rule, and there was no mistaking what this was. It might be orcs speaking, but the words were the harsh teaching of the War College – the Carrion Lord's own.

Vivienne had not turned her cloak to keep living under the laws of the Black Knight. She tried, even now, to keep her eyes ahead. On the Liesse Accords, that single piece dream that could not be called anything but a good for the world. The lone and lonely light in this ugly sea of grey. Yet the Accord were far on the horizon, and the tide was drowning her now.

"We'll need to amend the operational plan," Adjutant said. "Leave some of the garrison behind and keep what we send out in a tight cluster with the Wild Hunt ready to gate them out if the Empire mobilizes."

Vivienne's heart skipped a beat. It was what she'd wanted to hear. What was his angle, here? What did he gain by this? *What does he gain by the Liesse Accords*, the old whisper came, *that he would champion them so ardently?*

"The Hunt is the key to our defence, Hakram," Marshal Juniper said. "If the League or Procer strikes-"

"If," Deadhand repeated. "A possibility. Is it a fact that we're losing people now, Juniper."

"I don't like it," the Hellhound said. "It leaves us fragile."

"You don't have to like it," Adjutant said. "It's an order. Now, Thief. I believe we have a map of the region somewhere around here for proper planning, but I'd like your thoughts on how we should go about the evacuation. I'm leaning towards a circular sweep, but you've people on the ground and I don't."

Vivienne Dartwick leaned forward and spoke, the council stretching for over an hour before the bare bones of a plan had been laid down and a recess was called until they'd all looked into the proper records and logistics.

The patient watchfulness in the orc's eyes never left for a moment, and she never ceased to look for it.

Interlude: Giuoco Pianissimo

"He who trusts no one finds only enemies."

Callowan saying

Back when he'd been an unblooded boy in the middle of nowhere, Hakram had occasionally indulged in a game of his own devising. *Tower-raising*, he'd called it. It'd been a simple thing, at first, more an exercise in fantasy than anything deep. Three piles of ten coloured stones, each led by a lord or a lady, and to win one of them must accumulate twenty stones and so raise their tower. For a stone to be taken from a pile, two other lords must agree on the theft and who received the stone. Hakram had amused himself with elaborate intrigues, a web of vivid alliances and betrayals explaining every acquisition. He'd only ever played alone, in the Steppes, and never once finished a game: no rational alliance could ever last long enough for a winner to emerge, after all. His mother had mistaken his hours staring at rocks as an interest in things spiritual, and so urged him to seek apprenticeship under the shaman of the Howling Wolves clan. He lacked the gift of sorcery, true, but it was rare among orcs and not all rites and rituals required the touch. Most shamans could not actually light a torch without flint and tinder, no matter what was pretended in front of outsiders.

He'd had no reason to refuse her, and the half-hearted attempt had taught him some interesting tricks and stories before he was gently sent back to train with the other warrior younglings. Hakram had not forgot the game, though, and after he was sent to the War College he spared the odd hour for refining it now and then. Rules had been added. Ways to gift a stone as a bribe to break an alliance or make one, promises that could not be broken and even a way to destroy one's own stones to apply pressure. And still, not a game finished. Not even to one's loss, after losing became a technical possibility. Perhaps it was because he was the only player, he'd thought, and so roped a few humans gullible or ignorant enough to believe it was an old orc game into playing with him. He'd lost coin keeping the drinks coming without any success to show for it. Hakram had first met Robber, he still recalled fondly, when the goblin had found him playing while on watch in a war game and called him a fool before baldly stealing an entire pile.

"It's not clever as you think it is," the other cadet had said. "There's no kingdom without borders, my splendidly ugly and dim-witted friend. Why are they alone building their tower?"

And so, over the months that followed, they'd tinkered with the game together. It had become an experiment for the two of them, one of the few thing that could truly keep his interest throughout the dreariness of the War College. First they'd added another pile of ten stones and called it Callow, from which any of the lords and ladies could take a stone. It'd not ended the stalemate, for as soon as one player pulled ahead the other two allied to steal away what he'd stolen. *There's a fitting metaphor for this glorious empire of ours*, Robber had mused after a particularly well-watered evening. *No crab will ever let another leave the bucket before it does.* Perhaps the issue was that Callow could be taken from with no consequence, Hakram had decided. And so he'd added one more rule: if no tower was raised in thirty turns, the wrathful Callowans would come and hang all three lords. It'd been a naïve thought, in retrospective, and Robber had been right to mock it. Neither of them ever came across a player who would rather another win than all three lose. It'd been Ratface who'd solved the riddle and given the game its final form.

"Your problem," the Taghreb had opined, "is that you two are too honest. Everything's out in the open, the rules are identical for everyone. It's a shit game for the same reason any halfway decent military strategist will laugh if you tell them shatranj is a good metaphor for war."

Robber had been mortally wounded by the assertion of honesty, and promptly demanded a duel to avenge the impugnable dishonour of goblinkind. Ratface's immediate denial had been met by threats he would be first up against the wall when the Great Goblin Conspiracy took action, but even as those two bickered Hakram had amended the rules one last time. Three lords, with uneven piles. One with ten stones, one with eight, one with six. Their stones would remain hidden until they won or lost, and so cold mathematics were diluted with skill at the oldest of Praesi arts: the lie. Even then, most games ended in threefold loss and bitter recriminations. But now and then, oh so rarely, someone managed to raise their tower. Hakram had come into the habit of playing a game at least once a month, afterwards, fascinated by the little details that meant difference between victory and defeat. No one had ever won twice in a row, for example, for one victory meant the specter of suspicion would remain on the victor for a long while.

Aisha, back when she'd still shared a bed with Ratface and so often spent evenings drinking with Rat Company, was the only person he'd ever seen win beginning with six stones. She'd bided her time and kept the game going until everyone was too drunk to remember properly, then bargained her count up until she could steal a victory from the Callow stones. Hakram still thought of those evenings in Ater sometimes, of the reek of smoke and cheap drinks in that winesink they'd whiled away so many hours in. Now Ratface was dead, his grave bought and paid for by the same Empress they'd once served, and

he'd spoken to neither Robber nor Aisha in the better part of a year. The game remained, though the last he had played it was years ago. In one of those little ironies of life, it had been the day before he met Catherine. He'd lost along with a roaring-drunk Nauk and an indifferent Pickler.

Callow had taken them all.

He'd put the rules to ink, not long before the Woe left for Keter, and the scroll had been left to wait somewhere in the methodical chaos that was his office ever since. Hakram had mused of writing memoirs, once in a while, as he knew Juniper and Aisha were doing. Juniper's were more commentary and chronicle of these *Uncivil Wars*, as the campaigns from the Liesse Rebellion onwards were beginning to be called by scholars, but then she'd always disdained everything but the military side of matters. There were days Adjutant thought he owed to all that came after him to pen a history of what was taking shape here that was true to the beliefs of the few making the decisions. On others he thought, rather ruefully, that such a work would be the very same kind of manuscript his duties would require him to order burned as a threat to the kingdom's peace. And so instead he found himself, now that he'd been able to wrestle an hour away from his work, penning a short monograph on the subject of tower-raising that was about both much more and much less.

The foundation of the game, he'd written, *is the manipulation of incomplete knowledge. It is possible to win with only loose grip of the arithmetic, so long as one's understanding of their opponents runs contrastingly deep.*

He'd come to see much through that lens in the last few years. It was not, he thought, an unfair way to sum up the way the fractious nations of Calernia were behaving. The rising towers differed in nature and appearance, the stones were made of a hundred different abstract details, but the underlying exchanges obeyed the same overarching rule: for someone to measurably benefit, someone else must lose. Cordelia Hasenbach had birthed the Tenth Crusade by promising benefits to all its participants, leaving unspoken that those benefits would have to be taken from Callow and Praes. Having failed to achieve that plunder, her Grand Alliance was now clawing at itself over their own stones. The Empire remained overlord of Callow only so long as it provided protection by other marauding powers who would take from it. Yet prominent elements of Praes had acted in a hostile manner at Second Liesse, with the tacit allowance of the Empress, and so Callow had pressed for independence. He still believed Malicia had made a reasonable decision in some ways, for if she had succeeded in securing the Diabolist's doomsday weapon she would have made herself too costly a target to plunder.

From that position, all that would have been required of her was to wait for the lack of benefits to break apart the Grand Alliance.

And yet she'd failed, for she had not accounted for the fact that a game was a game and people were people. One could be philosophically correct while being wrong in practice, as she had been when she'd estimated neither the Black Knight nor Catherine would turn on her after the Doom of Liesse. He and

Catherine had fallen for the same mistake, Hakram thought, when they'd predicted that military defeats within certain bounds would both force and allow the First Prince to come to the negotiating table. *We did not account for the heroes*, he thought. *We did not account for the priests and the Heavens and the hand behind the hands.* And so the desperate alliances that were the heart of tower-raising had followed, reaching out for the bargain offered by Keter for counterbalance against Proceran intransigence. Which had failed, for the Empress had much less to lose and so could afford to offer better terms. And so Catherine left for the Everdark, intent on making miracle out of misfortune. She might succeed. She was, after all, never more dangerous than when no one believed she could possibly triumph. Or she might not.

If that were the case, what he and Vivienne Dartwick were building in Callow would be the sum total of their assets. He was forced to act with incomplete knowledge, and that ignorance dictated harsh terms: if this was all there was, defeat here of any kind was unacceptable. When Catherine returned, this machine must be well-oiled with every cog in a pristine state. Hakram set aside his quill, suddenly having lost taste for further writing. He blew dry the ink on the mostly-empty parchment and rolled it up before sliding it into a sheath. It would keep. There were matters that might not, Thief most immediate among them. The orc draped cloths over the bottled sprites that cast the light in his office, knowing it would lull them to sleep and so offer brighter glow when he returned. Not common knowledge, that. It was a secret Masego had nonchalantly shared, forgetting as he always did that there were perhaps ten individuals more learned than him on all of Calernia and that hundreds would cheerfully commit murder just to have a look at his most casual set of notes.

There was a guard waiting outside the door, one of his own. Sergeant Audun, who was broad and covered with tattoos like all adults of the Frost Tread clan. He had the almost-black skin common in the furthest reaches of the Lesser Steppes, where the isolation had prevented the old bloodlines and customs from thinning.

"Sergeant," Hakram greeted him in Kharsum. "Where is she?"

"Sir," Audun acknowledged, keeping his lips tight over his fangs in deference. "Last report had her headed for the Docks. As per orders, we did not tail her out of the palace."

Adjutant nodded and clapped his shoulder before heading out. Tordis kept suggesting that they send a few goblins out to shadow Thief whenever she went into the city, officially to make her easier to reach in case there was sudden council to be had. There was no point to even trying, in Hakram's eyes: in a city, Thief was impossible to find unless she wanted to be found. Assigning her a shadow she would inevitably catch on to would only be tossing another ingredient in what was already turning out to be a dangerous brew. The orc knew the tavern that was her favourite haunt, deep in Guild of Thieves territory, and even if she was not already there she'd hear of his coming long before he got there. Long enough that she'd show up to meet with him, if she was so inclined,

though of that there was no guarantee. With Catherine away the pretence of amity had given its death rattle. He would still go. At worse, he'd have a pint of terrible beer and leave one of her Jacks a message before returning to the palace. Not the way he would have preferred to spend what promised to be his only resftul hour for the next few days, but preferences were always the first thing headed for the altar when the going got hard.

He declined an escort when heading out. Malicia's assassins had already emptied their quiver, and there would be few who could truly be a threat to him even if she had not. He almost wished they would try him, in truth. Laure was swimming with Jacks, and further hacking away at the Empire's roster of hired killers would be a long-term boon. He drew gazes when passing through the Whitestone, as much from legionaries as from the locals. Anyone able to afford one of the district's mansions would know him by name and description, if not necessarily by sight. Further into the city, though, the nature of the gazes changed. Hakram was not known well enough that Callowans would tell him apart from other orcs by sight, not with gloves covering his hands and his burnt plate still in the palace. Unlike Catherine and Indrani, whose Names were an invisible bonfire drawing the eye wherever they stood, his own was a muted thing. Noticeable enough, when it left the sheath, but it had not. The reception he got was, to his perpetual surprise, rather cordial. Now that the last legions in the kingdom had been folded into the Army of Callow, even greenskins who had never served in the Fifteenth found the locals had thawed to their presence.

The same could not be said for Soninke and Taghreb. The freshly-promoted Legate Abigail had passed down the order that all Wasteland legionaries on leave must carry clear indicating mark of their service in the Army of Callow, which had prevented angry killings in the streets after Malicia massacred a third of the royal court, but a handful of altercations had forced her to go even further and order such legionaries to move only in tenths and avoid certain parts of the capital entirely. Enterprising Callowan merchants had made a killing by setting up stalls of drinks and food near the army's camps, allowing the soldiers a taste of the luxuries without risking their neck. The orc's lips split in amusement, baring the slightest hint of fangs. It was a rare thing for his kind to be more popular in these parts than humans, even humans from the Wasteland. He passed by a cart near the edge of Mathilda's District – known as the Usurper's Quarter to the locals – and found his steps slowing when he caught scent of the grilled rabbit skewers on it.

It was a ramshackle thing, not even painted as such Callowan carts usually were, and he absent-mindedly noted it was unlikely its owner had paid the proper dues to whatever guild held the rights to sales on these streets. The dark-haired man running it had done well regardless, he thought, for two thirds of the cart were empty and the grease stains left behind made it clear it'd not begun the day that way. Hakram made his way to the skewers and reached for the handful of coins he carried, mostly coppers. The dark-haired man smiled.

"Afternoon. You Legion?" he asked, his Liessen accent thick.

Refugee, most likely, the orc decided. Good to see some of them were making their way without needing to rely on the grain handouts.

"Fifteenth," Hakram agreed. "Since the raising. How much for one?"

The man hesitated, and there was movement behind the cart. The orc's head cocked to the side as a little boy no older than nine popped out, fair-haired and not resembling the other human in the slightest.

"Hi," the little creature grinned.

Meat, the lizard voice in the back of his head said. *Soft, small, bones easy to crack and get at the marrow*. He ignored it, as all orcs who left the Steppes were taught to. He'd learned well enough there was only silence around his comrades, but it was always harder with strangers. His people had been given rules by the Black Knight and then his successor, and they were good rules. The kind that ran against instinct but helped you grow further. *You can eat foes, you can eat the dead, but you must not touch any other.* Still, he knew the impulse would never entirely go away. The rules were taught, but the impulse came with the blood. Orcs had to learn discipline, he thought, make it as much a part of them as the blood. Or they would forever remain beasts of the steppes, good only for death dealt and received.

"Hello," Hakram replied gently, keeping his fangs behind his lips.

"Albert, get back behind the cart," the man sighed.

"But it's *boring*," the boy whined.

He was unceremoniously dragged back by his collar and the cart-owner offered the orc an apologetic glance. He picked out a skewer and handed it.

"On the house," he said. "They've been out for a while anyway."

Hakram inclined his head in thanks.

"Much appreciated," he said, thick gloved fingers closing around the wooden stick holding the bits of meat together.

"My husband went to enroll last month," the Liessen admitted. "Ended up sent to the training camp near Ankou."

"General Hune's," the orc said. "He'll do well there, especially if he can read and write. There's a pressing need for officers."

"We could use the pay," the man ruefully said. "The only decent rents in this city are Dockside, and even with the Guild of Thieves keeping order that's no place to raise a child."

"You seem to be doing well enough," Hakram said, eyes lingering on the cart before withdrawing.

He popped a bit of savoury meat into his mouth, swallowing it without chewing. Ah, nothing but salt and rabbit. He did enjoy Callowan cooking. Unlike the Praesi they didn't drown every dish with spices, you could still taste the meat.

"No telling how long that'll last," the Liessen replied. "Word is Legate Abigail, bless her soul, told the guilds to take it easy on the streets for a while. The guards don't enforce permits as heavily as they used to. But now the Lord

Adjutant's back in the capital, so it'll be out of her hands. No one's sure when the hammer will come down."

"I've noticed she's popular in these parts," Hakram said, mildly amused at receiving a confession concerning himself.

"She got Laure through the troubles after the Night of Knives," the merchant said. "And without swords coming out or riots wrecking half the city. Mind you, I'm not cussing out the army. They do good work, and I saw in the camps down south how bad it might get if they didn't keep the peace. But there's something reassuring about having one of ours in charge, you know?"

"Lady Thief holds the regency in the queen's absence," the orc pointed out.

The man rolled his eyes.

"You don't spend much time in taverns, do you?" he said. *"The old crown it got split in two, one part green and the other one too.* It's not a mystery who runs the kingdom with the Black Queen gone abroad to scare the shit out of Procer."

It was not to Hakram. Giving Vivienne the regency had been, from the beginning and Catherine's open admission, been a way to avoid the perception greenskins now ruled Callow. Thief did not want the duties, and Adjutant honestly did not believe she would fare well bearing their burden. That the man in the street knew it as well, however, was not a pleasant surprise. *We keep underestimating these people*, he thought. *Malicia and Hasenbach have, to their ugly surprise, but we do as well and we should know better.*

"She'll be back," the orc said, still too taken aback to muster better response.

"Aye, she will," the Liessen said. "And maybe she'll drop a lake on the western borders, this time. Let them try to invade across *that*."

"We can only hope," Hakram drily said.

"Ah, but I shouldn't blabber," the man said. "Don't let me keep you. It tastes best while still warm."

"Thanks again," Adjutant said, inclining his head.

He stepped back onto the street, already mentally adding another entry to his never-ending tally. There might be others like this one, who'd trade on the streets instead of eating on the crown's dime if they could. Getting the guilds to waive their dues even as a temporary measure would be like ripping out teeth, and sure to unsettle a city still uneasy, but there were ways around it. The House of Light in Laure had full coffers, according to the Jacks, having entirely recovered from their scarce years under Imperial rule. If they could be talked into paying the dues for merchants as an act of strategic charity, the guilds might even lower their demanded cut out of deference for the priests. Yet another council would be required, he thought tiredly, and with people prone to the kind of squabbling that would make Thief and Juniper seem like beloved sisters. The boy popped out to wave him goodbye and Hakram waved back, waiting until he was out of sight to gobble half the skewer and lick his chops. His good mood did not last, for even as he chewed he was forced to admit the Thief situation was worse than he'd previously believed. If a wander down the

streets had him hearing the rumour, how often would the spymistress of Callow have heard it?

Even a small wound could go bad, if salt kept being rubbed into it, and this one was not small. Pride always bit the hardest and Vivienne Dartwick had no lack of that. Sundown was beginning when Hakram finally reached the signless tavern that was Thief's favourite sink, and he'd been feeling eyes on the back of his head for at least half an hour. The Jacks had picked him out and their mistress would have been informed of his coming arrival. She was waiting inside when he entered, tucked away in a little alcove with a tankard in hand and her feet propped up on a chair. As always, she forced herself to not look at his bone hand – even covered – so blatantly she might as well have been staring. The orc lumbered over slowly, making sure to keep the skeletal limb always in her field of sight and moving slowly. He'd noticed it got even worse, when he hid it away from her eyes.

"Adjutant," Thief drawled. "Heard you were looking for me."

He sat down, the wooden frame creaking under him, and nodded.

"I was. Let's have a talk, you and I," Hakram gravelled. "An honest one, for once."

The flare of wariness she poorly hid was not auspicious beginning, but he had no choice. It could not be put off any longer. He needed to be sure they were raising the same tower, for decisions had to be made.

In the game, as in all things, it was always better to be the betrayer than the betrayed.

Interlude: Zwischenzug II

> "In the East they say that doubt is the death of men, but I have seen the end of the forking path and reply this: so is certainty, only for others."
>
> Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Panic blanked Vivienne's mind, for a heartbeat. Her fingers clutched the tankard so tightly she felt like it should break. Was this it, then? The conversation that took place before the Deadhand snatched the life out of her? *I can run*, she thought. But that would be declaring treason, or close enough, and they would hunt her like an animal. How many of the Jacks would stay loyal, if there was a price on her head? Some, but not enough. The guildsmen who'd once answered to Ratface and she'd begun to fold into her own web would turn their cloak without batting an eye. She was still Queen of Thieves until someone took the stolen crown from her, but that was more custom than law and Catherine had put the fear of her in their bones. Some would sell her out, if the alternative was crossing the Black Queen's right hand. She'd sent all her people away before Deadhand arrived, anyway, leaving the two of them alone with the hearth crackling in the corner. The thief forced herself to drink down some ale, heart still beating against her eardrums. She would, could not fall to pieces so easily. *Let's have a talk, you and I*, the orc had said. He'd phrased it like it was an offer, like there was a decision to make.

They both knew there wasn't.

"Honesty, is it?" she said, affecting a drawl. "I did not know you traded in such luxuries, Adjutant. Ambitious of you."

He did not smile. Unsure where to look – coldly assessing eyes, lips hiding fangs or that *damned* hand even when hidden under a glove – she drank again instead.

"Do you know," Hakram Deadhand mildly said, "I can't remember the last time I was genuinely scared. I've been afraid for us, in fights, but actual terror? No, not even when the Queen of Summer came down. I can't imagine what it would be like, living with that sword always hanging over your head. Colouring every sight and scent, creeping into every corner of me."

Vivienne set down her tankard, slowly and carefully.

"To be afraid of something," she said, "you have to care about something first."

And do you? Did he care about a single thing in all of Creation? Sometimes she thought he loved Catherine, though not in a way that would lead to courtship. The Woe were so often like sunflowers, turning to remain facing the burning glare hung up in their common sky, and of them Hakram Deadhand had been the first. The kind of love, perhaps, that a drowning man would have for the shore. But even that could not be the sum whole of anyone, and how could she trust in the words of a creature that treated every moment like one on the stage? Vivienne was not sure which truth would be more dangerous: that there was something buried deep beneath, or that there truly was nothing at all. The orc inclined his head, thoughtful. The gesture and accompanying visage was not common to his kind, the thief had known enough orcs to be certain of that. It was learned. Presented consciously to her eyes.

"I have been thinking of a game, lately," Deadhand said. "I will spare you the details, for they are largely irrelevant to this conversation, but there is one part of it I have been struggling with."

The thief maintained a pleasant smile, letting him speak without interruption though her mind was wheeling. A game? It was questions she had expected, not some delicate metaphor.

"Trust," Adjutant said. "That is the one element I could never quite figure out. The game cannot be won without the players hiding their thoughts, yet it cannot truly advance without trust either. I've tried to make a study of why it fails or emerges but found no success. The same answers rarely apply twice."

"A matter best left to philosophers, perhaps," Vivienne said, too wary to venture blindly into this. "Or theologians, I suppose. Faith and trust have much in common."

"Do they?" the orc curiously asked. "It is my understanding you were raised to the House of Light, but I never learned its teachings in any depth. My people, not unlike the Praesi, see prayer more as bargain than oblation."

And there it was, the itch in the wound. Not the religious matters, but the part he had casually mentioned. My people. The Praesi. As if they were two different things entirely. Perhaps they were, Vivienne thought. She'd entertained the thought often enough in the past. Why would the first orc Named in centuries subordinate himself to a human from a land that was traditional plunder and raiding grounds to his own kind? Oh, his Name lent itself well to obedience. But even if he'd ended up the Shepherd he could have returned to the Steppes and lived like a king until his death. Where was his gain, she had wondered? Her answer had been that by staying at Catherine's side, he could do more than his people than by returning to his desolate home or remaining in true Imperial service. Cat had been, by then, as good as queen of Callow even if there had been the thin pretence of a ruling council. If the Empire was broken apart from the inside, if the Clans were supported by a Callowan sovereign

whose closest friend was an orc... And yet there'd been no trace of the steps that should precede that.

There was no greenskin faction at court. There'd been, as far as she knew, no suggestions of diplomacy with the clans of the Steppes or with the powerful officers of his kind in the Legions of Terror. Even when it came to the Army of Callow, he'd been one of the main proponents of investing in training Callowan officers rather than simply relying on the veterans acquired from the wounded legions who'd joined after Second Liesse. His game was not an obvious one. The assertion that he could be driven by personal ambition was laughable. Deadhand could have taken any seat on the queen's council with but a whisper in Catherine's ear, and to be frank even without any formal title he'd held authority so broad and absolute some actual kings would have envied it. How much higher could he rise without holding a crown of his own? Yet Adjutant held no noble title, no lands, no significant military force of his own. He could commandeers most of these, but he had not cultivated personal loyalties or gathered supporters – even when it would have been almost childishly easy to do so. He was, in essence, the perfect loyal right hand.

That degree of apparent flawlessness in anyone would have made Vivienne's skin crawl, but in so skilled an actor it was more than just *alarming*. As the silence stretched the thief realized she'd allowed the conversation to lapse, and cleared her throat.

"I'm not the best person to explain it," she said. "I never had much interest in priestly matters."

"And yet you fought by the side of a man touched by the Choir of Contrition," the orc said. "Something few priests can boast of. Callowans are a study in contradiction, sometimes. You've birthed as many heroes as the Praesi have villains, but rare is the song sung in your taverns that praises angels or Heavens. Always the kingdom, always rebellion and revenge and old scores settled."

"How often have your people been the invaded instead of the invaders, Adjutant?" Vivienne softly asked. "Curse not walls of your own raising."

"Aye," he said. "We have done that. Yet I find it fascinating, the faces nation will paint over faceless Gods. Praesi hold their Gods Below to be peerless schemers, for that is their favoured art. Goblins call the whole lot the Gobbler, a single crawling thing that will one day devour the same Creation it spewed out. Death is the only certainty they embrace as a race."

"And orcs?" Vivienne asked.

"Below is just what they teach us to call them in the Wasteland," Deadhand said. "We know them as the *Hungry Gods*. We've had our lesser idols, as all other peoples have. But that altar was the first and remains the greatest."

"Kings and shepherds fit the same cookpot," Vivienne quoted, tongue stumbling over the rough syllables of Kharsum.

She was the only one of the Woe who did not speak it fluently. Catherine had been raised in an orphanage and Indrani in the middle of the fucking woods,

and still they'd been *surprised* she did not speak orcish. As if it was a given that everyone should.

"Have you ever seen an orc go without meat for long, Thief?" Adjutant said. "An experiment was made by some Soninke lord called Ehioze, a few centuries back, so the process is well documented. He grabbed three hundred orcs in their prime, who'd committed one of those crimes that is only ever a crime when the Praesi need fresh bodies, and locked them up for study."

The thief's eyes narrowed. She did not reply.

"For the first month, it's barely noticeable at all," Deadhand continued. "We'll get irritable, aggressive. Slower in thought. Then at the beginning of the second month, skin will grow tight and muscles melt away. Our bodies start eating themselves alive. By the middle of the third month, we are no longer able to tell faces apart. It's all a thick, red, pulsing *haze*."

Her fingers tightened under the table, not that she remembered putting her hands there.

"Ehioze was a dutiful scholar," the orc mildly said. "Just starving them would not have been enough. He sequestered parts of the three hundred and studied how different manners of feeding would affect the process. He suggested afterwards that it was possible to keep orcs at the beginning of the middle state, before muscles start going, if they are fed two pounds of meat a month along with higher quantity of other provisions. It's true, as it happens. I know this because his suggestions were used as the standard orc rations in the Legions up until the Reforms. They called it *Ehioze's Measure*."

"They wanted you able to fight," Vivienne said.

"But not think," Deadhand finished softly. "Or we might just question why it was never Praesi that faced the charges of your knights."

"I imagine there's quite a few orcs in the Legions, even in the Army of Callow, who have grandfathers and grandmothers that lived under the measure," she said.

He nodded. Not wary, never wary, for that was to be her curse and not his.

"There's another part to that tale, Adjutant," the thief said. "One you forgot to tell. You see, there's quite a few Callowans in the army who have kin that got *eaten* by orcs. Not even thirty years ago. What the Wasteland did to your people is a horror. What they went on to do to mine is a fucking horror as well, and one does not expunge the other."

"I know that too, Thief," Deadhand said. "You asked, in your own roundabout manner, what it is I care about. I have answers you won't care to hear, but this one you will. I care about seeing a world where, when I tell this story, the woman on the other side of the table can't reply the way you did. Where we're more than hunting hounds for those who *measured our starvation*."

And there it was. Everything she had feared – hoped? It was such a blurry line, some days – he would say. The confession that he meant to use Callowan lives to secure orc interests. How long would it be, until Catherine's fanged Chancellor whispered the right words to have her war for the independence

of the Steppes? And yet... *He has not prepared for this*, she thought. The orc was meticulous to a fault, so where was his spadework? Where were the correspondences and the deals, the alliances made in the dark? Where were the mouthpieces for this ugliest of crusades? Part of her wanted to dismiss all the absences as him simply biding his time, but it rang false. It was fear giving answer, and Vivienne despised how seductive those whispers were. She was willing to fear for her life, for her home, but what was she if terror was the sum whole of her? Just another prisoner, yet another Callowan who'd never quite left the days of Imperial occupation. The moment she ceased looking for the truth, she was lost.

"And yet you are here," she said. "In Laure. Working for a kingdom you love not, when you could be raising banner among the clans of your kind. *Why*?"

"Of all of the Woe," Deadhand calmly said, "you should understand that best. I could raise rebel flag, I could give the Tower a war it would remember for a very long time. I might even win it and cast down that peerless tribute to murder. But what would that accomplish, Thief? The head bearing the crown changes, the world moves on and two hundred years from now we'll be right back where we started. You don't cure a sickness by fighting the symptoms. You go after the root, or it will linger until death."

"The Liesse Accords," Vivienne said.

"The Liesse Accords," the orc agreed. "They will not come to be unless we take a hatchet to everything that holds up Praes, beyond repair. And under those rules, that agreement of nations, we change things. Not a dynasty's name or a few battles won or borders on a map. We truly *change things*."

It was perhaps the only argument he could have brought forward that would have appeased her without appeasing her too much. A perfect balance struck. The thief could feel the hair on the back of her neck rising. There were devils in the deepest Hells that did not have half as silver a tongue as Hakram Deadhand.

"And so, I now worry of you," Adjutant said.

"I have been more ardent a defender of them than any of us," Vivienne harshly replied.

"So you have," the orc easily conceded. "And that surprised me, for while Callow will benefit they are not tailored for the primary benefit of the kingdom – and it is Callowans that will bleed to have it signed."

She'd run with heroes once, the thief remembered. Men and women who'd carried the broken pieces of their old lives with them just as the Woe did, and some nights she wondered how deep the differences truly were. And then there were moments like this, where the killer across from her was surprised that she would embrace salvation extending further than her own little corner of Creation. Like it was expected that the lines on the map delimited the border between people and foes and there could be nothing between. William had been a monster too, in his own way, and Vivienne had neither forgotten not forgiven what might have taken place in Liesse without Catherine's intervention. Rare

was the day where she did not curse herself for having hesitated, having quibbled. Having allowed it to happen without raising a fucking hand. But even William would never have been surprised by someone trying to do good for the sake of doing good. *I discarded those hesitations*, she thought, and threw in my lot with the Woe. *I made a bet on Catherine, and within the year a hundred thousand innocents were dead.*

"I can hate the princes of Procer, for their rapaciousness," she said. "I can hate those who allow themselves to take arms for a morally bankrupt cause and the heroes who would see us burn for a point of philosophy. I can do all that, and not hate the people under them."

"And yet there is an imbalance, isn't there?" Adjutant quietly said. "It is not equal care. Who you hesitate, if the choice was between a Callowan life and a Proceran one?"

"And that makes me a villain?" she hissed, and immediately regretted it.

Panic flared. Was this going to be it, then? The moment where he reached across the table and snapped her neck like kindling?

"You are afraid," Deadhand noted. "There is no need. You have not spoken anything I did not already suspect. And that is my worry, Vivienne. Because deep down you still believe, you still *act*, like you're the same girl who was at the Lone Swordsman's side. You are not."

"And so to keep my throat uncut I must kiss the feet of the Gods Below," she said. "Is that it? Shall I eat a baby to prove my dedication to the *cause*?"

"Your life is in no danger," Deadhand calmly said.

She laughed, right in his face.

"Is that so?" she mocked. "Why, because Catherine would be cross if you killed me? It would pass. She needs you too badly, and you'll be able to tell her you tried before I so regrettably forced your hand."

"Your murder would be seen as a greenskin coup, regardless of context," Adjutant said. "So if you cannot believe in my own intentions, at least believe in the practicalities involved."

"Spot on, Deadhand," she snarled. "There's nothing quite as reassuring as hearing one's death would be politically inconvenient."

"So that's the kernel," the orc said, sounding surprised. "You do not believe you have worth."

She flinched. That had cut too close to home for comfort. The orc's brow creased.

"You stole a sun," he slowly said. "And were instrumental in the killing of several of our most dangerous opponents."

"You do have a talent for the exact," Vivienne said, "Instrumental is precisely the right word."

An instrument, wielded by sharper minds and quicker hands. A bundle of aspects to be used as a surgical tool, perhaps sometimes a discreet pair of eyes. *You are all Named*, she thought. *I am an artefact that breathes.* And the moment she strayed from that function, what came but defeat? By the Grey

Pilgrim, by fae, by a *single Praesi mage*. Lightning coursing through her veins, not delivered by some ancient power but a single woman with a speck of sorcery to her. The humiliation of it only deepened the echoes of the pain across her body.

"War is not your Role, Thief," Deadhand said. "Forcing the matter will only result in failure."

"Then what is my damned Role, Adjutant?" she asked quietly. "Because there's no need for a thief, here, and what else can I be used for? I do not rule, I do not lead armies, my judgement is background drone to decisions of import even when Catherine *is* here. Is that all? Am I just the forced voice of morality that must be sweet-talked before we take yet another plunge. Gods, I am tired of being an obstacle instead of a speaker."

The orc considered that in silence.

"Trust," he said, sounding almost amused. "Always trust. I would offer you a bargain, Vivienne Dartwick."

The deal or the grave, she thought. So it finally came to that, Catherine's little helper tidying up all the loose ends.

"You're right," Adjutant said. "You never spoke the accusation, yet you are right. I have no great love for this kingdom. I see what it takes from her, from all of us, and I wonder how it could be worth it."

The orc's eyes met hers squarely.

"So teach me," he said. "Why I should care for it. Show me."

"I can't squeeze tears out of a stone, Hakram," she tiredly replied.

He nodded, as if he had come to a decision.

"There is nothing I can say that will convince you," Deadhand said. "You are not wrong. Even oaths are just words."

The orc methodically took off his gloves, one after the other. Flesh first, and the scuttling bone. He brought up the skeletal fingers.

"Your knife, please," he said.

Vivienne's pulse quickened. Slowly she palmed her blade, eyes remaining peeled on his face, and she saw only cold determination there. Gods forgive me, she thought. *Hide*. The hand remained there, his eyes on hers. *Hide*, she thought again, panic mounting. She could touch the aspect but it refused to bloom. It was like trying to catch smoke. Gently, the orc took the knife from her sweaty, shaking hand.

"I made a promise to you, once," Adjutant said. "One I have come to regret."

The tip of the blade touched the bone hand with a soft clink, artfully moved to allow it from his grip.

"Only blood can wash away bad blood," he said. "Our peoples have that in common. I should not have forgot it."

The knife came down, hard enough to shake the table beneath, and carved into the orc's only flesh wrist. Blood spurted as Vivienne's blade scraped across bones, fear and astonishment taking hold of her.

"Adjutant, what-"

"My word is of no worth to you," Hakram Deadhand calmly interrupted her, face pale and taught with pain. "That is not unwise. Amends must be made. So when you next doubt your value, I want you to remember this: when the choice came, I judged you well worth a hand."

The orc's wrist pressed down, bone shattered and Adjutant's black blood crept across the table as his hand came fully severed.

Interlude: Giuoco Pianissimio II

> "A man could sift through all of Creation and never find so much as a speck of this elusive thing called the greater good. Like all the most dangerous altars, it is entirely of our own raising."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"It looks like you shoved the stump in a fire," Fadila Mbafeno sighed.

That was, in fact, exactly what Hakram had done. Blood loss could kill even Named, and while pushing a fresh stump into a hearth fire until the flesh cauterized had been excruciatingly painful it'd still been better than dying in a ratty Laure tavern. Masego's assistant – and nominal head of the Observatory in his absence – had promptly answered the summons after he returned to the palace, and begun to work on healing his wound without quibbling. There were other mages in the capital, of course, and many priests. But Fadila was Praesi, and that had decided his choice of healer. The Soninke had been raised to understand the value of discretion and not inquiring in the affairs of one's social superiors. The dark-skinned woman leaned closer with a silvery scalpel in hand, cutting slightly into the burned flesh at the end of his stump. No pain, he noted, though that might simply be because he'd grown light-headed enough he no longer felt it. The blade came away red and the sorceress washed it in a bowl of clear water before wiping with a cloth.

"I'll need to cut away the burnt flesh before healing the damage beneath," she informed him. "Healing is not my specialty and burns are trickier than most wounds. Pouring magic into scorched flesh tends to have... unpredictable results."

"Do as you see fit," Adjutant gravelled. "I will defer to your judgement."

She nodded in appreciation.

"You've lost a large amount of blood," Fadila added. "I'd recommend poultry, fish and red meat – which are staples of your people's diets, regardless. Orcs lack the most the issues involved in human blood transfusions, so it's certainly possible if you want to accelerate recovery, but my understanding is that local mores frown upon those kinds of rituals."

"It won't be necessary," Hakram simply said.

The full consequences of his actions must be played out, lest the gesture be robbed of some of its weight. She did not question his answer, as she had not lingered on the subject of reattaching the hand after he'd declined. The Soninke passed her knife under open flame to cleanse it, and then set to the methodical business of prying away the burnt flesh on his stump before healing it. The spell she used for that purpose, he did not recognize. The sorceress used no incantation, and the shape and colour of the magic were different than that used by the Legions of Terror. The pain returned quick enough, a deep ugly throb, and Hakram only then realized she'd discretely numbed his nerves before her early examination. Kind of the Lady Mbafeno, he thought. The title occasionally tossed in the foreigner's direction by servants and court officials was a source of mild amusement to him, he could privately admit. It was a Callowan courtesy title, one that would likely have gotten her killed if she'd claimed it while still in the employ of a Wasteland patron – it would have denoted the kind of ambitions Praesi aristocrats disliked finding in their subordinates.

Fadila Mbafeno had, after all, once been *mfuasa* to the Sahelians. Servant blood, it meant, a distinction between commoners and those retainers directly in the service of the nobility. Hakram had studied her background in some detail, as it happened. After Masego had snatched her from the gallows and placed her in his service, Catherine had rather bluntly told the orc that if Fadila was a risk she would be getting into an 'accident' as soon as feasible. The investigation had led to an interesting look at Praesi customs, particularly pertaining mages. Sorcery and political power had been intertwined in the Wasteland since long before the Miezans ever made shore on Calernia, in Praes more than any other region. The lords high and low had bred sorcery into their lines with methodical precision, bringing talented mages into the fold whenever it seemed like the blood thinned, but those were ultimately limited arrangements. Both Soninke and Taghreb saw more mages born than any other human ethnicity on the continent, which meant it was effectively impossible for the nobles to keep the practice of sorcery entirely within their own ranks.

Adjutant had read the appropriate treatises, back in the College, and so he was aware that most people born with the Gift either never realized they had it or died young after an uncontrolled or untrained use of sorcery. Another significant portion had too little talent to be able to practice sorcery beyond a few tricks without extensive tutoring, though when born to wealthy families such types made up the backbone of alchemists and academics in the Empire. It was the smaller portion that had a Gift strong enough for ritual or combat sorcery that had the High Lords and their vassals regularly sifting through their subjects. The treatment those 'lucky' few received varied from region to region. Taghreb, as a rule, treated them like a sort of lesser nobility and created mage lines within their territories that could be called on when there was need for war or marriage. Soninke, as in most things, proved too complex to easily generalize. The policies of Okoro and Nok tended towards bringing

agreeable mages into the fold as *mfuasa* and those judged unreliable forced into service with the local noble's household troops. The stubborn and the runners disappeared.

Aksum was the most traditionally hard-line, with any mages not leashed or wedded unceremoniously slain before they could become an issue. Akua Sahelian's own father, famously, had been born with enough talent he could be a threat even as a servant and no spare relative to wed him to. He'd had to flee the region with killers after him, finding refuge in Wolof. The line to which Fadila had once been sworn to, and the last of the great Soninke cities. Wolof was a centre of sorcery rival to Ater itself, and had remained so for millennia by investing heavily in raising and training mages. It was well known to 'acquire' mages from other regions in difficult situations, but Fadila had been born in the city and so fallen under the aegis of its internal policies. Like all children with promising magical talent, she'd been taken from her family while young, the parents being offered a lump sum as redress for the loss of a child, and trained at the High Lady's expense until she reached the age of twelve. Young mages who made it that far – not a given, the mortality rate was one in three – were assigned permanent service to either the Sahelians or one of their vassal families, a highly politicked process that the ruling family of Wolof used to both reward and slight their subordinates.

The loyal got rising talents, the troublesome only the dregs.

Fadila herself had been judged of sufficient prowess to enter the service of the Sahelians themselves, and cultivated as *mfuasa* to the family. She'd known Diabolist socially but never been in her personal circle, and been considered a likely fit for a teaching or research position after she spent a decade or two fighting as a combat mage for her masters. Her talent as both a ritualist and a theoretician had been noted in Praesi circles – she'd made some waves after proving it was possible to forge a weak artificial sympathetic link in scrying tools – and that reputation was likely the reason Diabolist had picked her as a retainer when she set out to engineer the Doom of Liesse. The amount of work required in turning an entire city into a runic array would have been massive, and she was a natural fit for Akua Sahelian to delegate the lesser tasks to. It was fortunate, Hakram often thought, that she'd been snatched from Diabolist's service before she could serve that purpose. How much faster would the Doom of Liesse have come, with such a helper?

"There," Fadila said, placing her silver knife back into the water. "That is as much as I can do. Should you change your mind about reattaching the hand, it will be necessary to cut off a sliver of the stump and a degree of functionality will be lost. In case you were unaware, limb reattachment attempted more than ten hours after the loss has at most a one in four chance of success. I can't speak for what Lord Hierophant would be capable of, naturally, or even Callowan priests. Their methods are largely beyond my understanding."

"Duly noted," Hakram replied, gaze turning to the stump.

His dead flesh had been carved off, piece by piece, and instead thin green

skin now covered his wrist. Almost thin as a human's, he thought, though it would thicken in time.

"Be careful with it, it's fragile even by human standards," the sorceress said. "As it happens, the flesh reached full saturation during the process. I won't be able to touch it again for at least two days, and after that only minor touch-ups. It would be ideal if you could avoid puncturing the skin for a full month."

"I'll be careful with it," Adjutant said, and blinked.

He'd been trying to move fingers that no longer existed, he realized. That would be an adjustment.

"Thank you, Lady Mbafeno," he finally said. "That will be all."

"It was my pleasure, Lord Adjutant," she respectfully replied.

She gathered her affairs and bowed before leaving. She might not have seen the Wasteland in years now, but the manners remained with her. The angle of the bow had been the one court etiquette dictated as required for a High Lord of Praes. Though he found himself in a thoughtful mood, Hakram did not linger in the private room he'd requisitioned for the treatment. This business, after all, was not quite done. His conversation with Thief had been interrupted by the woman's obvious horror at his actions, worsened when he addressed the bleeding with cauterization through the tavern's hearth fire. That was not entirely unexpected. He'd given it better than half odds they would have to take recess while the wound was properly seen to, when deciding his course of action. Hakram usually slept in his office, whenever he could spare time for slumber, but he did have personal rooms of his own in the palace. Amusingly enough, they had once been those of the queen consorts of Callow – he was not certain whether Catherine was unaware of the fact or simply indifferent, though an alternative might be that she knew and it was actually her sardonic sense of humour at work. Regardless, they were the rooms closest to her own. He'd been rather touched by the implications of that, though he still used them only rarely.

Thief would not come to him in his office, he knew. It was, in her eyes, the seat of his power. It was also where he kept his axe, and Vivienne preferred him unarmed when she could stomach to see him at all. A place where he could be expected to go but where his presence was lightly felt would be the most appropriate setting for the last part of their exchange, and so the orc did not waste time dawdling before heading for his quarters. He'd felt eyes on him the moment he passed the threshold of the healing room and twice more while on his way, and so it was no surprise that Thief awaited him inside when he opened the door. Her informants must have been tracking him all the way to here. The personal quarters of the queen consorts of Callow had been luxurious even before Laure and its royal palace fell under the rule of Wastelanders whose own nobility was known to be ostentatious to almost absurd extents. The orc had stripped away most of the decorations, though the furniture itself had been of very good make and so remained intact. The only luxury he'd occasionally partaken in was the large balcony outside overlooking a garden, the closest to

a spot of green he'd been able to find in this city. It was there that Thief was awaiting.

She looked small and thin, sitting on an open windowsill and bathed in moonlight. Even for a human. Catherine was shorter, but like her teacher she had enough presence it was barely noticeable when looking at her. Vivienne Dartwick's hair had grown longer, he noticed once more. Hakram did not allow his eyes to linger – his attention would only have worsened whatever issue lay behind that fact – but he'd noticed when it first began. Before the departure for Keter, and for it to have been noticeable even back then it must have started slightly earlier. Namelore was a muddle of imprecisions and exceptions, he knew, but where there was an effect there would be a cause. If, as Catherine insisted, the appearance of a Named was a reflection of how they saw themselves then such changes in Thief were a warning sign as to her mental state. Worrying, considering her influence and formal charge over the only spy network Callow possessed. Vivienne would not need to rebel to damage the kingdom, only withhold key information at a crucial moment. Or, more likely in his eyes, simply *leave*. The hole that would make would be a crippling blow to a kingdom that'd effectively begun being raised from the ground up a mere two years ago.

"Adjutant," she said, flicking a glance at him. "At least you had enough sense to see a mage."

"I would have survived it," he simply said.

Moving slowly, he came at her side. Large as the open window was, there would be no accommodating the both of them if he wished to sit with her. Instead he simply rested his elbows on the windowsill, leaning forward. Though he did not turn to watch, he felt her eyes looking down at the stump. Good. There had been, he'd realized early, no real chance any words from his lips could sway her. She distrusted him too much. Catherine could have a fireside chat with a stranger for half an hour and have the come out willing to murder in her name, but that had never been one of his talents. He could ease and turn currents, but not birth them. It was important for a Named to recognize their limitations, he believed. The costs of arrogance were so much higher for them than anyone else. Knowing that, Hakram had been forced to make a decision. Simply allowing things to unfold as they were was not to be seriously considered. The longer Thief was allowed to consolidate her power – and she already was, by bringing the informants who'd once answered to Ratface under her banner – the costlier her defection or betrayal would become. It might have been possible to draw the matter out until Catherine returned, if he'd had a precise notion of when she would, but he did not. That left killing her before she became an issue or finding a way to stem her doubts.

"The very devise of the Woe," Thief murmured, eyes leaving his absent hand. "*We will survive*. It smacks more of desperation than valour."

"Valour is the game of the winning side," Hakram replied. "If you can afford to worry about appearances, it's not a war to the death. We've known precious

little else."

"There comes a time when those excuses grow thin, Adjutant," she said. "I was taught as a child that dark circumstances are a test of character. That the righteous rise above, that the wicked *sink*."

"I was taught as a child that killing a man for a goat was glorious affair, if done on an open field," he said. "We are more than our first lessons. We have to, or we'll only ever be what our ancestors were before us."

"There is worth in old lessons," Thief said. "In old wisdom."

"If they were so wise," Hakram mildly said, "why did we inherit such a debacle of a world from them?"

She went still.

"Those ways kept Callow free for millennia," she said.

"They failed, in the end," the orc said, not unkindly.

"To the Carrion Lord," Thief replied. "How often does Praes spawn a man like that? Calamity was the right name for his band. The kind of catastrophe born once a few centuries."

"Even before him, this kingdom was the battlefield of the continent," Hakram said. "Praes invaded every other decade, Procer whenever the stars were right. How often has this land truly known peace?"

"We have brought many things to Callow, Hakram Deadhand," the Thief soberly said. "*Peace* was not one of them."

"I am told," he said, "that births are rarely gentle affairs."

"And what are we birthing?" she said. "There has been more martial law than actual law, over the last two years. We've assassinated and hanged, sacrificed thousands to make deals and still we tremble in the Tower's shadow. At what point, Adjutant, does a justification become an excuse?"

"We have also fed the starving," Hakram said. "Sheltered the lost. We've built a kingdom and reclaimed its border. The good may not erase the bad, but the bad does not erase the good."

"And yet I wonder," Thief said. "Could others have done what we did, without the costs? Without compromising who they were?"

"If there were such people out there, they have not come," Hakram said. "You compare yourself to ghosts of your own making."

"We're not the best, but we're what there is," she bitterly said. "I've said that myself. To others, and while facing the mirror. That too grows thin with the repeating. Gods, if those people had come I have to ask – would we have killed them? *Did we*, before they ever came into themselves?"

"If they could not face us-"

"They couldn't face Malicia," Thief sharply said. "Or Cordelia Hasenbach, or her heroes, or the Carrion Lord. I know, Gods damn you. I know. And I know, too, that I might as well be shouting into the void when I say this but it needs to be said anyway: we are not the lesser evil. Not anymore, when we seek to make pacts with the fucking Dead King and move armies like pieces on a board for diplomatic gains. The only difference between us and the old evils

is that we're newer at this game and nowhere as good. That isn't a distinction to be proud of."

And there was the rub, for Hakram had known this kind of talk before and never put much stock in it. He'd spoken with Juniper, once, and I her own blunt way she'd laid bare the heart of it. Callowans looked at knights and saw chivalry, honour and all those other virtues. Orcs looked at knights and saw killers on horses. Vivienne had championed causes, one after the other, that had been put aside in the name of necessity. Yet they were not unworthy, none of them. She felt discarded and ignored because, frankly, she had been. Her only victories had come by the planning of others, used as a cog in a greater machinery. Hakram rather enjoyed such a role. It was what he'd been taught, what he was good at. But he stood certain of his worth outside that boundary, and Vivienne Dartwick did not.

They had to start listening to her.

Not because they would lose her if they did not, but because she was right – or at least not entirely wrong. They'd all flocked to Catherine's banner because they liked the world she wanted to make, that she made just by being who she was. And Thief, in her own way, was perhaps the most ardent partisan of that. Because she would stick by that vision even when Catherine did not, even if it made her the only objector in a council. An obstacle instead of a speaker, as she'd put it herself. How many of those councils had been true debates, instead of a confirmation of a decision already made? *Too few*, Adjutant thought. *Too few for what we want to be.* He could feel her eyes returned to his stump, and knew the bargain had been worth it. The lessons had been learned well. *Are we not all your students, Catherine? In our own winding ways. You taught us that there is always a way through, if we're willing to bleed.* Words would not convince Thief, but now every time doubt came she could look at the stump and know, know beyond doubt, that she had been judged worthy.

More useful a thing than a handful of fingers.

"So tell me," Adjutant said. "How we can be different."

Her gaze met his, hesitant. Fearing. Assessing. Hope was always a most tempting cup to drink from, even when you knew the chalice might be poisoned.

Vivienne Dartwick spoke, under pale moonlight, and Hakram Deadhand listened.

Interlude: Queen's Gambit, Declined

> "Fifty-nine: it is always better to interrupt a plan than carry one out. Your finest successes will always be the failures of your enemy."
>
> 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

"You're in a damned fine mood, for a man who can barely stand," Ranker muttered.

Most would not have been to pick up on it, Amadeus thought, but the goblin marshal had been his friend for a very long time. Longer than the common understanding of goblin lifespan should allow for, but that was one of the subjects they did not speak of. Ranker had a right to her secrets, as he did his. The Black Knight tightened the woolen blanket draped over his frame, looking up at the night sky with the barest trace of a smile on his face.

"It's nostalgic, isn't it?" he said. "The few of us huddling in the dark, surrounded by a realm that would kill us all."

His detached force numbered two thousand, with Marshal Ranker in overall command as her sappers and scouts would be more valuable to their purposes than regulars or heavies. Cooking fires had been judged too much of a liability to be allowed even after a days of marching under his aspect that should have left any would-be pursuers in the dust: the legionaries had dropped their kits and made their beds on rough ground, not even bothering to raise fortifications beforehand. Ranker's decision, and one he'd approved of. Their pace was already taking the soldiers dangerously close to their breaking point, aspect or not.

"It hasn't been like this since the civil war," Ranker conceded. "The Conquest was orderly campaign, nothing like this one. Feels like we're making it up as we're going along."

"Planning too deep will be seen through by the Augur," Amadeus reminded her. "We stay a step ahead so long as we make short-term decisions backed by superior pace."

It was a little more complex than that, in practice. Thrice now the First Prince's fresh mage order had passed along auguries of where his legions would

be headed, though their very interception meant that they were effectively worthless. Prediction and prophecy were different matters, after all. The former was very much avoidable, if known, while the latter tended to be like a sandpit: the harder you struggled, the swifter you drowned. Even those could be broken, of course. Prophecy was only ever the writ of one side of the Great Game, and if outcomes were so absolute there would be no need for Creation at all – according to the Book of All Things, anyway. Still, even the predictions of the Augur were an exceedingly dangerous tool for the opposition. Considering how sparsely it had been used and the recent revelations as to the forces stirring up north, Amadeus suspected that if the Dead King had not been on the move and requiring the soothsayer's attentions this campaign would have been much more troublesome.

"I'm aware," she flatly replied. "And I have some fond memories of the old days, do not misunderstand me. But back then we were still young. To our places, to our powers, to our stories. It's been a long time since we were any of that."

"*Sing we of foe*," he softly hummed. "*Of victories won, and that first woe, tyranny of the sun*."

"You know I hate that song, Amadeus," Ranker grunted. "It's the anthem of old defeats, a ballad of ruin."

"It was a cold, clear look at what we were when it was written," the Black Knight said. "We are no longer that, yet I suspect we never truly outgrew the sentiment."

Like a poisonous old friend, it had been clutched tight even as the fangs sunk in and venom spread. *The Tyranny of the Sun*, for the most famous verse of the song was the title as well, had been written near the end of the Sixty Years War. Arguably the most brutal slugging match between two sovereign powers in the history of Calernia, and it had left both Callow and Praes smoking ruins in its aftermath, peace coming largely because neither side was still capable of continuing the war. Dread Emperor Nihilis had retreated to the Blessed Isle with his armies and ended it without ever signing formal treaty, but he'd died failing to rebuild the Empire and a hundred years of murderous mediocrity had followed until Praes recovered enough to embark in its disastrous waging of the Secret Wars. In some ways he suspected the Sixty Years War had been more traumatic an experience to Praesi culture than the collapse of Triumphant's empire a century and a half earlier. Triumphant had known success before meeting her doom. The parade of Emperors and Empresses who'd waged war on Callow for sixty years had known much of the latter and little of the former.

"We," the goblin chuckled. "There's a word growing thinner by the year. We are exiles in more way than one, Amadeus. You saw to that after Akua's Folly."

"It is not the first time I've been told I should have tried to climb the Tower," the man shrugged. "It will not be the last, I expect. It would have been a self-

defeating enterprise to wage civil war in the Wasteland with Procer assembling its armies just across the border."

"The Clans would have come out for you," Ranker said. "Most likely the Tribes as well. The Matrons smell weakness, Black, and there's only ever one way they react to that."

"I can think of few things more foolish than to underestimate Alaya," he quietly said. "Even now. She's never been one to act without a plan, and that we do not understand her moves should be source of fear and not contempt."

"Odds are she's the one who made a pact with the Dead King," Ranker said.

"It could have been Catherine as well," Amadeus frankly admitted. "She thrives in chaotic situations. It's led her to the bad habit of creating them knowing it improves her chances of victory even if it significantly increases collateral damage as well."

"The Black Queen," the goblin mused. "There's another trash fire of a situation. One you've stepped lightly around."

"The Conquest was a way to achieve objectives," Amadeus said. "The annexation was ultimately a consequence, not the purpose itself. I hardly mind surrendering unnecessary gains if the actual objectives are met through the gesture."

"The arithmetic holds," Ranker sighed. "It always does with you. But there's more to this than the numbers, old friend. We made an order of things, and now it's crumbling."

"And now you wonder what will replace it," Amadeus said. "And if in that new order, we will still have a place."

"Some might say it's too early to start thinking about after the war," she said. "You and I know better. No point in even seeking a victory if when achieved it leads nowhere."

"A better world," the Black Knight murmured, looking up a stars that were not those he'd been born under. "Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like."

"We made one," Ranker said. "It's on fire now."

"And who set the flames?" he smiled. "Cordelia Hasenbach. Catherine Foundling. Kairos Theodosian. Children, in our eyes. Yet is it not the right of the younger generation to look at the work of that which came before it and judge it *insufficient*?"

"So they're right, and we'll be swept away like dust by the new age," Ranker said, sounding distinctly unimpressed.

"I still do not believe," Amadeus of the Green Stretch murmured, "that I am wrong. That our methods, our works, are to be so easily discarded. If these younglings want to prove themselves worthy of shaping the world, well. . . "

He bared his teeth.

"Let them come," he said. "Let them earn it. If they can surpass us, then the sin is ours."

"And if they can't?" Ranker asked.

"Then they fall into line, or face destruction, and we fight one last great war," he said. "The one that will *matter*."

The two of them remained silent for a long time, seated at the edge of the camp. In the distance, the barest glimpse of the town of Saudant could be made out. Just a lakeside township, one of hundreds in the region. Amadeus doubted the name of it would be remembered as more than a footnote in histories, for no battle would take place there even if he'd been wrong. Under the light of the stars, the Black Knight pondered Providence and the coward's wager that was Fate. He did not sleep, even tired as he had become.

With dawn he would know if he had once more cheated the Heavens at dice.

—

Gauthier Legrand had served as ranking captain of the guard of Iserre for thirty years now. He'd served Prince Merlaux before Prince Amadis ascended the throne and been appointed to his title by the old prince, but there'd been no talk of having him replaced even when the young prince took over and began inserting his own partisans in posts of influence. This he attributed to the fact that he'd carried out his work steadily and honestly, avoiding court politics and the intrigues intrinsic to any of Procer's royal seats. He was not unaware that his occasional bluntness and refusal to earn favours by offering plum positions to the kin of the influential had led some to consider him simple, though the more polite phrased it as him having 'a soldier's spirit'. Gauthier did not mind. As long as they considered him an idiot they would not attempt to involve him in their little schemes, and he rather preferred it that way. Iserre had only grown larger and wealthier under Prince Amadis, but that rise had come with the troubles inevitably associated with a city expanding. Maintaining order and the rule of law was toil without end, especially in a land where both could change face at the whims of the ruling prince.

Amadis had done well by the city, he'd always thought, and the principality as well. Their prince had kept them out of the worst of the Great War with cunning diplomacy and duly reaped the benefits of Iserre's rising prominence when the steel returned to the sheath. Old Prince Merlaux had shown a better touch with the commons, that much was true, but his son was a much more able administrator. The guard's funding had swelled under Amadis, and their equipment was now match for many of the fantassin companies out there making a trade of war. It'd seemed an unquestionable boon at the time, but now Captain Gauthier was forced to question. Not a state of affairs to his liking. The principality was under assault by wicked Easterners from the Wasteland, and to everyone's dismay the general levies that had preceded Prince Amadis going on campaign had bled the land dry of men in fighting fit. Iserre itself was the capital of the eponymous principality, and so had kept a garrison of two thousand professional soldiers, but the guard's equipment was only marginally inferior and it numbered five thousand.

In principle the defence of the city was the responsibility of the commander of that garrison, Antonine Milenan. In practice, their leader was middle-aged

drunk whose entire experience with martial life was a span of three years with a fantassin company that had never left Iserran borders during the Great War. She had, allegedly, commanded a victorious skirmish against bandits. Rumour had it they'd actually been terrified refugees from Salamans but that in her drunken rage she'd refused to see a difference. There was a reason that Antonine had not been given a command in the crusading host, and Gauthier supposed that a few months ago giving her command of a garrison that would never see combat had seemed a discreet way to set aside a cumbersome relative for his prince. Now that the Wastelanders had come, however, it meant that the woman had been quietly placed under guard in the palace where she could make no trouble. An unfortunate measure prompted by a well-lubricated evening where she'd decided to order the garrison of Iserre to sally out and 'disperse the foreign rabble on the field'.

And so Captain Gauthier Legrand now led the defence of Iserre.

The responsibility alone would have been difficult to bear, but as the effective commander he'd been the one to receive the secret orders from the First Prince of Procer. Penned by a scribe, most likely, and the content would have been decided by her officers – Hasenbach was a well-known oddity, a Lycaonese with little taste or affinity for war. Gauthier saw the cold sense in the letter he'd been delivered. With only two thousand soldiers, his guardsmen and whatever peasantry he could arm and send to stand on the walls his defence of Iserre was a risky enterprise. The easterners might be impious demon-worshippers, but the Legions of Terror were known to be one of the finest armies on the continent and their generals were of high renown. The captain knew himself to be no great tactician, and hardly a soldier besides. He had dwarven engines on the walls, due to his prince's foresight, but few and few men trained to use them. The devices were well-known to be finicky and prone to breaking anyway, rarely lasting more than five years under regular use. Rough handling might see a few unmade before they could even be properly put to work.

And yet here he was, reading a report stating the Legions were but a day's march away and considering treason.

There were no two ways about it, disobeying the First Prince's orders would be high treason. The Principate had declared a crusade, her authority in military matters was absolute. Gauthier was not a soldier, which in different times might have provided him a way out, but as the commander of the city's defence he was charged to obey any and all orders bearing the seal of Cordelia Hasenbach. The actual text of those was delicate and regretful, but the heart of it a brutal thing: after short defence on the walls, he was to draw the Praesi inside Iserre and set the city on fire around them. His troops were then to evacuate and join the relief forces sent by the Dominion, to fall upon the easterners while they were freshly bloodied. Iserre, as of Prince Milenan's last royal census, counted over a hundred thousand souls between its walls. Gauthier knew it was more than that, perhaps as much a ten thousand more who were foreigners and so unrecorded or too estranged from the law to want their presence

noted in anything as official as a census.

He would not be allowed to evacuate them. Their panic, the letter noted, would prevent the Praesi from pulling out their forces in time by clogging up the streets.

He wrestled with the decision throughout the night. Handpicked men discretely prepared the blazes, for he did not give the order now it would be too late afterwards, and when dawn came Iserre had been turned into a pyre. It was the arithmetic of it that stayed with him. There were, according to reports, perhaps fifteen thousand easterners and not even half that many bandits with them. A host of twenty thousand at most. And his orders were to burn alive five times that many to wound the Praesi. He would be damned in the eyes of the Gods, if he did this. Yet how many more would die in towns and villages, if he did not? Not merely in Iserre, but all over the realm. Duty and faith tugged him different ways. Midmorning saw a Praesi envoy reached the city. The offer made was as brutal as the orders of the First Prince: should Iserre surrender its granaries and treasury, the city would be spared a sack. If it resisted, all armed inside the walls would be put to the sword. Gauthier rode out himself to speak with the envoy, to the gaze of Evil with his own eyes.

The thing across him was green of skin, one of those creatures they called orc. A barbarous monster that ate human flesh and lived only for blood and rapine. There was nothing in its eyes but hunger, Gauthier saw. A small woman with ink-stained hands and the colouring of the Free Cities stood by its side, though she remained silent. Some kind of servant, he suspected.

"The terms will remain as offered," the orc said. "Negotiation is not on the table."

"You're a long way from home, greenskin," Gauthier said. "Fighting the wars of humans."

"We go," the envoy said, "where the banner goes."

"Your banner has come to the Principality of Iserre, Gods take you all," the captain said. "We do not bow to foreigners. We do not bow to servants of the *Hellgods*. If you want your fucking loot, come and take it."

"A respectable choice," the orc said. "But you may come to regret it."

"Tell your masters this is Procer, not one of their slave cities," he spat out. "Test our walls at your peril. We were there, when the Tower fell. We will be again."

The words, though defiant, were as ashes in his mouth as he rode back to Iserre. He'd just ensured the city he'd spent his entire life guarding would either suffer fire or a bloody sack. The Legions of Terror arrived past noon, and he watched them spread out from atop the walls. Dwarven engines stolen from other cities and armories were brought to the fore, their shapes changed by the devious goblins – which rumour said were dwarves corrupted into foul form by the touch of the Gods Below. The easterners and their traitor auxiliaries built their camps and only began bombardment under cover of nightfall. The city's walls had been rebuilt fully early in the Great War, and so they suffered but

did not break. Gauthier feared not the stones, only the assault of the steel-clad soldiers. Two more days passed, with only one breach to show for it – quickly filled by sacks of sand and gravel at his order – but time was running out. The assault would come soon, he knew, and the decision he must make with it. Duty or good? Gods forgive him, but as the fourth night fell Captain Gauthier made his decision. Better he be known a traitor than a butcher. When the assault came, he would empty the city and ride to Salia for his trial.

Then dawn came, and with first light came the realization that the Praesi were *gone*.

—

"Steady," Amadeus ordered. "I want no incidents."

The town of Saudant's entire defending force had been a sum of thirty militiamen, who immediately folded when they realized how heavily outnumbered they were. There'd been actual soldiers behind them, though, who had fought: the Levantines had left four hundred soldiers to guard the fleet of barges that had ferried them across the lakes at the heart of Procer. None had surrendered, even when such an outcome was offered on rather lenient terms, and five barges had been lost to fire and fighting before they could be eradicated. A regrettable loss, but Amadeus had burned ships himself not a day later. The barges had carried thirty thousand Dominion infantry, while he would at most move twenty thousand soldiers himself. Having no intention of leaving Procer with any ships after he passed, the surplus had been put to the torch.

The sailors and captains to which they belonged had been furious, but they were not armed and so in no position to contest his orders. The First Prince had assembled this fleet by requisitioning merchant trade, not building warships, and considering piracy was night-inexistent in Proceran waters the merchant sailors had rarely carried anything larger than a knife. They were also less than eager to die for the sake of the Lycaonese ruling Salia who'd pressed them into service, which meant his assurances that the sailors would be released unharmed after ferrying his own troops where he wished had been received with more gratitude than hostility. Amadeus had taken pains to be accommodating with them, as Praesi were poor sailor as a rule and the Legions largely unfit for sailing ships. Some Thalassinans in the ranks had middling experience at sea, but too few and those few had too little practical experience to properly captain barges. It might be possible to proceed without the sailors, but only at a snail's pace – which would rather defeat the purpose of acquiring the fleet in the first place.

The legionaries he'd called out after nodded at his order, moderating the language they used when speaking at the locals loading the ships. Finding out there were still supplies in the town meant for the already-departed Levantine army had been a pleasant surprise, implying he'd caught the very end of the enemy supply train without meaning to do so. He was not a fool, of course, and so he'd checked the grain and foodstuffs for poison. Hasenbach might have grown desperate enough for such a stratagem, even if the Levantines were not.

None had been found, and he'd been pleased enough at the discovery to dole out a portion to the inhabitants of Saudant as incentive to load the rest more quickly. Barely more than a thousand people overall, and so easily appeased by the notion of being assured of plentiful stories throughout winter. Sadly the general levy by the prince of Iserre had meant few capable of hard labour remained, but he'd assigned a few legionary companies to help matters along.

Leaving the docks – and the friendly shore around them, where lack of space had dictated most barges would actually end up – Amadeus found Ranker awaiting him at the nearby tavern he'd appropriated as temporary headquarters.

"They have fishing boats," the goblin marshal informed him immediately. "At least a dozen."

"Not enough to ferry a significant amount of men," the Black Knight noted. "Sinking them brings little profit and antagonizes the locals. Leave them be."

"At least order them beach for a few weeks," Ranker said. "Otherwise some enterprising soul might try to find out where we're headed."

He nodded after a moment, though in truth he doubted their destination would be much of a mystery. Even if the Augur did not divine it, the strategic situation would make it obvious. By now Grem and Scribe should have lifted their 'siege' of Iserre, having remained there long enough to draw in whatever forces had been sent to relieve it. They'd hurry towards the nearest shore, where the fleet Amadeus has just seized would be awaiting them. From there, they could leave their pursuers to stew impotently on the wrong side of the Principate while they struck at easier targets.

"Have you decided where we'll be headed, after?" Ranker asked.

"Still a matter of debate," Amadeus admitted. "Segovia would allow us to finalize our savaging of the First Prince's opposition, properly damaging her position."

"But you're thinking of Salia," the goblin said knowingly.

"We can't take the capital," he said, stating the obvious. "Even arming a third of that hive would allow her to drown us in numbers. But if we torch our way through its outlying territories, the sheer loss of prestige might see her unseated."

"Grem will call it risky," Ranker predicted. "I don't disagree."

"And so it remains a matter of debate," the Black Knight said. "We will discuss in depth when reunited with him and Eudokia."

There was a beat, during which the goblin studied him thoughtfully and openly.

"It's been two days since you last used an aspect," she said. "I expected you to be in better shape by now."

"I drew deeper than I have in decades," he candidly admitted. "And you know my well is shallower than most. I expect within a fortnight I'll have recuperated."

She nodded, after a beat.

"Gods, at least it worked," she sighed. "I half-expected a band of heroes to be awaiting."

"There are over a hundred thousand souls in Iserre," Amadeus said, avoiding even the slightest hint of smugness. "Souls at risk of slaughter, if left unprotected. So long as we were willing to carry out that ugly work, it was possible to dictate where the heroic intervention would take place. I expect Grem found the place swarming with their like. It would have been a beacon lit for every sword of the Heavens not gone north to fight the Dead King."

"There's no need to get smug," Ranker told him, eyes squinting.

Alas, sometimes there was no winning a battle. By the fourth day, they'd departed the charming little town of Saudant on surprisingly good terms with the locals. Legionaries were spread too thinly across the fleet for Amadeus' tastes, but there were enough mages along that any sailors with notions of patriotic resistance would be forced into restraint by their more fearful fellows. The fleet made good pace, for the first three days.

Then the sickness started.

It showed in the sailors first. Fever, sweat, weakness of the limbs and after twelve hours they were dead. Amadeus ordered any with the symptoms thrown overboard as soon as he first saw the disease. It was too clean and too sudden: there had been no sign at all before the fevers, the sailors being in perfect health. It was not a natural disease. Reluctantly, he ordered every Proceran sailor disposed of after the first legionary showed symptoms. It was too late, by then.

On the sixth day, Amadeus of the Green Stretch found he was the only person left alive of the entire fleet.

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Tariq let out a panting breath when the last of the victims died.

There were Choirs, he knew, that treated their relationships with heroes as a sort of subjugation. The Hashmallim of Contrition, in particular, were known to be heavy-handed – though to this day he was uncertain whether it was because they bestowed upon only the desperate, or because such was their nature. As a young man, the Pilgrim had found that the Choir of Mercy demanded nothing of him. He'd simply been found to be of a like mind with the Ophanim, and so found them at his side. As if they had been there all along. They were more like old friends than patrons, never far from his thoughts. Always there with a whisper of comfort in hard times, a reassurance when the world seemed dark. They shared, after all, the same mandate.

The alleviation of suffering.

Tariq had no longer been a young man when he'd understood the frightful depths of that simple sentence. He'd thought, as mortals often did, that angels saw through his eyes. Understood his thoughts, his beliefs and his choices. The first, he thought, was perhaps true. The rest was not. The Ophanim were absolute, in nature and mandate. There were no shades to their perspectives, and while they might fondly tolerate them in one sworn to the Choir of Mercy that

indulgence should never be confused for *approval*. The Grey Pilgrim had first understood this when he'd smothered his young nephew in his sleep, knowing the boy was charismatic enough to unite the Dominion and lead to war against Procer. He'd tried, first, to reason with him. To show him the pursuit of old grudges through blood could not redeem a single thing.

The young never listened, he'd learned. And so old fools like him had to smooth out the sharp edges of Creation.

Praesi, he'd been told, believed that Good only came in certain shapes. That it must obey strict boundaries and rules, that it must rely on little tricks like Providence or angelic intervention. An understandable misunderstanding. For all that the raving Tyrants who climbed the Tower liked to style themselves anathema to all children of the Heavens, they'd rarely fought opponents beyond Callow – where heroism was so deeply linked to war that a villain waging one was now seen as good. Praesi had learned to bury and defeat a certain breed of stories, after millennia of butting heads against them. But oh, that was such a shallow understanding. The world was large, and so few ever saw more than a speck of it. There were as many stories as there were peoples, and to build one's understanding on but a fraction was to raise a tower on quicksand. The Black Knight, Tariq thought, was not a stupid man. But he'd been arrogant enough to think he saw all the rules of his world, and arrogance was ever the death of villains.

Crafting the plague had been easy as snapping his fingers, and mayhaps that was the most distressing part of it. The Enemy delighted in displaying its power, raising massive contraptions or weaving elaborate schemes to praise its own cunning and cleverness. Like it was the only side capable of doing those things, like it wasn't a *choice* to turn away from the unsightly means of the Gods Below. The Grey Pilgrim could have birthed diseases and disasters that would raise the hair on the Warlock's neck, if he so wished. But power had to used responsibly, turned to moral purpose, else it could only ever be a form of tyranny. And so Tariq had wept, and asked for the guidance of the Ophanim to create a disease that would undo the Black Knight and all his murderous designs. It was not so far removed from healing, to make someone's body turn on itself. To allow it to spread had required learning deeper than his, but as always the Choir had provided.

At a small price, a reminder of what he wrought. He would feel the agony of all taken by the disease.

He'd come to Saudant a stranger on a dark night, and seeded this foul miracle in a single man before taking his leave. Ten days and ten nights it would wait, before beginning to kill. That the Black Knight would come to the sleepy little town had never been in doubt. By the man's perspective, heroes could only go to Iserre. He was making sport of decency by forcing their hand with a threat before stealing away a fleet to spread even more death. *Where was it written*, Tariq had thought then, *that Evil will have monopoly on ruthlessness?* He'd awaited close, with Laurence and four other heroes for company.

Far enough such a small party would not be noticed, close enough he could ensure none of the sick would leave Saudant and spread the sickness to the rest of Procer. The Praesi had came, the Praesi had gone, and he'd followed in their wake. Laurence, in her own kind way, had offered to purge the town for him. He'd refused, and offered the Last Mercy himself.

This would be his own sin, from beginning to end.

They followed the villain after, taking fishing boats. No need for anything a gaudy as a barge, when they were only a handful. It was not difficult to find the Black Knight. He was at the centre of a fleet of dead men, a ring of ships adrift in the lake. Tariq was the first to climb aboard, though Laurence was not far behind, and they found him awaiting on the deck. Standing straight-backed, armoured in old plate without having bothered with a helmet. He watched them approach in silence, pale green eyes emotionless.

"We finally meet, Black Knight," the Grey Pilgrim said.

The man did not reply. He was eyeing the others, gaze lingering on armaments and armour. Guessing at Names, guessing at powers. Already planning the span of his last stand. Yet Tariq felt no power coming from him, no presence. As if his Name had been snuffed out. It might very well have been, the old man thought. The Gods Below reserved only one fate for a lame horse.

"Surrender," the Pilgrim said. "This will not end well for you."

"It was never going to end well," the green-eye man smiled. "That was rather the point."

His sword cleared the scabbard with a ringing sound.

"Let's see," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "if I can at least leave a mark."

Chapter 62

Impulse

> "I don't care if they've been training, it's only been two months. What could they possibly have learned that would threaten me?"
>
> Dread Empress Sinistra IV, the Erroneous

"The Mighty Berelun is willing to allow passage, but only for a tithe," Ivah translated.

The Mighty Berelun was full of shit, I decided. That it had accepted an envoy instead of sending a warband the moment we entered its territory had been an auspicious start, especially when it'd proposed one of the large caverns of the region as a meeting place. The Mighty, I had learned, preferred to lay their ambushes in small passages where they could best leverage their superior speed and reflexes without the risk of being swarmed by 'lesser' drow. Sadly, it looked like this was going to be a repeat of our aborted talks with the Purka Sigil. The cavern surrounding us might have been broad and high-ceilinged, but there were discreet little paths on an upper level where I could hear drow scuttling around like rats. Berelun had been smart enough to listen to the rumours already making their way through the outer ring but not quite smart enough to decide picking a fight wouldn't be in its favour. I was almost insulted by how few it had mobilized for the ambush: by the sounds of it, there couldn't be more than twenty.

Most of those would be ispe, the lowest rung of the Mighty. In practice, those were fighters with a handful of interesting tricks but none of the dangerous Secrets out there. As dangerous in melee as your average fae soldier, if much less mobile for the lack of wings. They were the kind of enterprising souls that joined up with a sigil as much for the protection as because the quickest way for them to grow in power was to slay and harvest other ispe – either those of an enemy sigil or that of their own. Mighty Berelun itself had prudently shown up with an escort, a pair of rylleh. Ivah's old rank, and one I'd begun to understand was higher up the ladder than my guide had previously implied. Rylleh were the drow just beneath whatever drow the sigil was named after,

called the sigil-holder, and considered the most likely contenders to eventually run through their leader and take the clan for themselves. They were also usually the heavy hitters in a sigil apart from the chief, which meant Berelun was taking us seriously. It would not have brought both its most dangerous rivals and strongest fighters to meet with us on the ground floor otherwise.

That *had* seemed promising, until I'd heard the ambush setting up.

"What kind of tithe?" I asked.

I had no intention of paying anything of the sort, but stringing this out a little longer would allow for a cleaner resolution. As if prompted by my thought, my ears caught the sound of a blade slicing open a throat. There was a muted gurgle and a body was quietly lowered to the ground. One down. Ivah addressed the Mighty in Crepuscular and I kept my eyes on its own. Deep, perfect silver set in a dark grey face that looked like it'd been carved with a knife. Berelun was larger than most drow I'd seen, broad-shouldered and heavily muscled. The obsidian blade strapped to its back could not be called anything but a greatsword.

"One in ten of your sigil, my queen," Ivah said. "With no fewer than six ispe among them."

My sigil, huh. That was one way to call the gathering throng of the desperate and the ambitious Akua was keeping an eye on. Two thousand, by now, though we were still thin on Mighty. Few of those were willing to take my bargain when it was extended. I'd already made my peace with the fact that we'd have to grow our own pack through harvest, and truth be told that might make them slightly more reliable in the long term. Another gurgle above, another drop. Berelun had dispersed its ambushers to make sure they'd be able to fire from all angles, looked like. It would have been decent tactics if I hadn't seen it coming. But I had, and their isolation meant they were easy prey for my own hunter on the prowl.

"Ivah," I said. "Ask the Mighty Berelun if it heard what took place between us and the Purka."

My guide's deep blue eyes crinkled in amusement, but it nodded. The exchange of words was swift, but not so swift that I did not hear another two throats cut.

"The Mighty knows of the destruction that was delivered unto the Purka," Ivah said. "It cautions you not to believe the Berelun to be weak or lacking in cunning. It says tithe will be paid, one way or another, and that pretending otherwise is foolish."

"So it thinks I'm speaking a threat," I mused. "When I was, in fact, delivering a warning. They might have been sloppier about their ambush, but the plan was quite similar."

Fifth death, then a pause. The sixth and seventh were nearly simultaneous. She was having fun with it, if she was getting that fancy.

"Is there to be fighting then, my queen?" Ivah asked, sounding less than worried.

"Eventually," I agreed. "Let's keep stringing them along for a bit longer. Quibble over the numbers, make it look like I'm considering the offer."

"By your will," the drow agreed, head inclining in deference.

By my final count, there were eighteen ispe who'd been hiding upstairs. My eyes remained on Berelun all the while, and I saw it getting increasingly impatient as moments passed. Not because of the negotiations, I thought. We both knew those were going nowhere. Most likely it was awaiting a signal before attacking and growing restless because it wasn't coming. After thirty heartbeats passed without another throat being cut, I elected to call down the curtains on the farce. Ivah was in the middle of a sentence, but paused when I raised my hand.

"I will offer them the same terms I offered the Purka," I said. "And the Trovod, and the Hilaron. They can kneel and take oaths, be granted power as you have been. Their forces will be folded into mine. Or they can be unmade. There will be no middle ground."

"They will refuse," Ivah said.

"I expect they will," I replied. "So here's a gift to help them understand the situation – Archer!"

My voice sounded loud and clear in the cavern. A moment later there was a mocking cackle and Indrani kicked down a drow's corpse from the upper levels. The throat was still bleeding, and after the cadaver landed with a dull thump blood pooled around it. Berelun and its bodyguards stilled, eyes moving back and forth. Ivah spoke to them, slow and cadenced. I'd heard enough Crepuscular I could begin to make out individual words, and knew the meaning of a few, but even spoken so slowly the language was difficult. Unlike any other I'd been taught on the surface. No matter: I'd set Diabolist to learning it, and when she was done I'd rip the knowledge out of her mind.

"The Mighty Berelun refuses your offer," Ivah said. "And demands your submission. I've also been offered admittance as fourth under the Sigil, should I turn on you."

"Well, it's a tempting offer," I drawled. "Have you duly considered it?"

"Alas for the Mighty Berelun," the drow said, "I much prefer being your Lord of Silent Steps."

The title rippled in the air, after being spoken, and Ivah no longer seemed to be Ivah at all. I could feel the shard of Winter in its soul, the way it spread through its veins with every breath and intertwined with the Night. It was not fae, but oh how close it had become. And all it'd taken was will and oaths, traded in the dark. Berelun caught on to the fact that negotiations had come to an end, ripping its obsidian greatsword free from leather bindings, and the attending rylleh followed suit. A steel-tipped spear to the left, a long ornate stone knife to the right.

"The usual arrangement stands," I calmly said. "Anything you kill is yours. The rest goes to auction."

The curved obsidian sword the Lord of Silent Steps had wrested from the corpse of the Mighty Trovod left its sheath with a pretty little flourish.

"May my hunt be fruitful, then," Ivah grinned. "I yet hunger."

Without another word, it vanished. Glamour, which of all the fae arts the drow seemed to take to the easiest. There were ways to use the Night not too dissimilar. I turned my eyes to the Berelun, whose earlier condifence had been shaken by the open use of power they did not recognize. It would be the least of their surprises today, I thought. They opened the dance with what I'd come to call the Hunter's Triangle. It was a tactic Mighty seemed to favour when facing an entity they suspected to be stronger than themselves but not by too broad a margin. Berelun itself advanced fluidly, greatsword raised above its head, while the other two flickered and dissolved into shadow. They would slither across the ground to flank me on both sides from the back while their chief kept my attention, all going for crippling blows instead of an outright kill. It was a tactic meant to get me slow and bleeding, not take my head. Drow fighting tactics were heavily influenced by the fact that the one amongst them to make the kill had the best claim to the body and Night therein. In single combat they immediately went for the kill, but when in a group they tended to go for the legs or the arms first.

The two rylleh flickered back into silhouettes with admirable timing. It was easy to see the three of them had fought opponents together before: the coordination was impeccable. The spear, knife and greatsword struck within a heartbeat of each other. They passed through mist, dispersing chunks of my body, and only then did I act. I returned to entirely solid form and my hand snatched the extended arm of the spear-wielder. My physical strength might have grown beyond natural boundaries but laws of momentum still applied to my action, which had required an adjustment I was only now beginning to get a handle on. My footing shifted, my torso pivoted and I swung the drow at Berelun's head. Silver eyes widened in surprise and I merely clenched my fingers before releasing the rylleh's wrist, crushing the bones in my grip. The last drow had kept its wits, and flickered back into a pool of shadow before I could strike it. Scoffing, I shaped and released a spike of ice that nailed the tendrils and forced the drow to flicker back into a silhouette. Wounded to boot, as the spike had gone through its leg, but Night flowed into the wound and the ice was forced out as the flesh beneath reformed. Neat trick, that one, but I'd seen it before. I backhanded the rylleh and sent it tumbling away, turning in time to see the other two drow extricate themselves and rise to their feet.

"Come now," I said. "Show me a few Secrets worth stealing."

Berelun snarled something in Crepuscular, the other grimly nodding. The Night pulsed and a supernatural darkness fell over me.

"Disappointing," I said. "Hilaron did it right at the start and it was much more effective."

The working was anchored around my neck, not a veil of darkness but a bubble meant entirely to blind me. It required flesh to be anchored to, how-

ever. I stepped back, feeling myself... slip. Grow vague and muted. The mist thickened back into myself one step removed from the now-pointless bubble, revealing the sight of the two of them slithering along the floor in shadow-form. Irritated, I smashed my boot down. The ground shook, stone splintered and the two of them were thrown out in drow-shape. I saw fear in the rylleh's silvery eyes as it realized what its chief had not. This was not a fight, not for me. It was a spar through which I was mastering the use my mantle. This entire cursed ruin of an empire was. The last drow had already gotten back on its feet, but it had other troubles. The Lord of Silent Steps had cut through the muscles on the back of its knee, and was now weaving one glamour after another to keep it striking at illusions while it methodically ruined its arms and legs.

The Night, it had once told me, felt deeper when taken with an enemy's last breath.

Berelun snarled once more and I rolled my eyes. It had yet to impress me. Six tendrils of shadow rose from its back, each forming a few fingers at the end that took obsidian knives to wield, and with its sword raised high it came for me again. The other drow actually bothered to be interesting, flickering into shadow-form but remaining a silhouette. That was a new one, and worth exploring. I formed a blade of ice and set out against the rylleh, ignoring Berelun. The shadowed drow shot forward, and only then did I notice the shadow had extended to its spear as well. Promising. I ducked under the tip of the spear and scythed through its ankles, but parted only shadow that reformed anew the moment my blade passed. It spun and smashed the butt of its spear against my armour, hitting above where my spine was. An exertion of will had frost keeping it stuck and when I turned the weapon was snatched out of its grasp. Curious, I plunged my sword through its throat and left it there. The drow panicked, wrenching it out, and my brow rose. Behind me I heard Berelun howl in pain when Archer's arrow took him in the back of the knee. Simply because she hadn't deigned to come down did not mean she was not keeping an eye on the proceedings.

I caught the rylleh's left shoulder but the shadows wriggled out of my grasp and it kicked me in the stomach. My plate took the blow without trouble and I frowned, punching it in the face. It rocked back, though with no visible damage. *Shadows are constantly moving and distributing any impact or cutting force across the entire body, so anything that doesn't last is ineffective*, I thought. On the flipside anything that lasted would do a lot more damage than it should. Too flawed a trick to be worth replicating, I assessed. The ice blade still in its hand turned to mist and formed again as a collar around its neck, tightening with but a thought. I left it to choke, returning my attention to Berelun. The Mighty was bound to have a few Secrets it'd yet to pull out. Archer's arrow had gone straight through the knee, steel tip coming out bloody, and it appeared that pain was enough to get rid of the shadow tendrils it's been wielding earlier. No great loss there. I could already do the same thing, more or less.

"So," I meaningfully said. "Bleeding and desperate. Now's about time to

pull out the fancy tricks, don't you think?"

It replied in Crepuscular.

"I don't speak that," I said, and shot a spear of ice at it to hurry things along.

It dodged effortlessly. Drow with that much Night swimming around their bodies had reflexes far beyond anything a human could muster even on their best day – even the Watch. I closed the distance, noting it'd ceased retreating and learning why a heartbeat later. Shadows roiled across its entire body and sprouted in seemingly solid spikes.

"Seen it before," I sighed.

I hardened my hand to be solid as stone and struck at the spikes, shattering them and sending the drow reeling back. Berelun's face was the picture of pained surprise, but it gathered its bearings long enough for one more trick. Night dripped down its body in thick rivulets, then shot out like arrows. One would have gone through my chest, but that was seen to with a half-step to the side. Yet the Night was hovering in the air all around us, I saw, forming some kind of spotty dome. Berelun smirked and stabbed its sword into the closest spot of Night. To my surprise, it came out behind me and carved into my plate. I moved forward, ensuring it wouldn't bite too deep, but that'd been rather unexpected. I felt it safe to assume a blow could come out of any chunk of Night, which left him quite a few angles to attack from. *Interesting*. I wove glamour over myself, leaving my illusion weaving around blows even as I left the makeshift dome myself, and reached for Winter. Perfectly reproducing this was probably beyond my ability. Maybe by using my domain I could do something similar, assuming the Night really was Sve Noc's own domain manifest, but it would require too much concentration to be worth it. If I was to wield my domain in combat there were better alternatives.

Using purely Winter, thought? This was a trick worth stealing.

I went about it methodically, since it was my first time. I formed frost at regular intervals around it on the ground in a loose circle, slight marks I could strengthen with barely a thought. Making frost marks that hung in the air proved trickier, until I started weaving them the same way I did platforms. Not trying to hang them up on something that did not exist, but interposing them between layers of Creation. Even then, I saw with mild irritation that the moment I tried using one of the hovering marks again it fell. The sound of frost breaking on stone caught Berelun's attention, and its eyes widened in fear and surprise when it saw the other marks. Time to wrap this up, then. I let Winter loose, shunting off the alienation into the others who drew on the stuff of my mantle – Diabolist, as always, but now Ivah as well. Spears of pure ice shot out from over thirty directions, puncturing Mighty Berelun's body like a rag doll. I withdrew them with a flick of the wrist, forcing them back into the initial marks, and the drow dropped to the floor listlessly.

Then an arrow went through the back of its neck, because Archer had a horrid sense of humour.

"That one was mine," she called out from above.

I gestured obscenely at her, earning only laughter in response. A glance told me that the rylleh I'd left a collar on had choked to death and Ivah was already harvesting the other's Night, kneeling over the dying body. Indrani came down, leaping from handhold to handhold on the cavern wall like some sort of demented grasshopper before landing in an unnecessarily elaborate roll.

"Diplomacy's a lot simpler than I used to think, Cat," Archer noted. "I'm finally getting the hang of it."

I sighed.

"Keep an eye on the corpses," I said. "Ivah will stay with you. We're moving in on the Berelun camp after Akua's people pick up the bodies for an auction."

"Sure, sure," she dismissed. "Look on the bright side, this isn't the kind of neighbourhood where people will ask questions if they run into us standing over a bunch of corpses."

I refused to dignify that with a response and left them with dead drow, beginning the trek back to what their kind had taken to calling my sigil. The auction would delay us by an hour or two, but no more. We'd crafted the system with our time constraints in mind.

It'd been Diabolist's idea. There'd been no issue at first, as the first sigil we'd run into was the Trovod. Ivah, fresh off its title as my first Lord of Winter, had single-handedly slaughtered the sigil's upper ranks and harvested all of them. It'd later admitted that even the sigil-holder would barely have qualified as a rylleh outside of the outer rings and it'd been more an execution than a battle. The two hundred meat – *nisi*, in Crepuscular – who'd belonged to the drow of the Trovod had been eager to follow us even before I made clear that the dwarves would be close behind. Nisi that were not under a sigil were fair game for any drow looking to accumulate a bit of Night, and all it would take was a single Mighty coming across them for a massacre to ensue. At best they might end up taken by another sigil and any among them with useful skills harvested. But then we'd run into Purka territory, and those had been tougher meat. Ivah had partaken, but eventually admitted it no longer gained much out of harvesting Night from lower rungs of the Mighty like the ispe. To continue feeding it the corpses would not significantly improve its combat capacity.

That revelation came right on the back of the fact I now had about one thousand nisi who wanted to follow us on our journey, along with a smaller contingent of two hundred *dzulu* – meaning person, more or less – which was what drow were called when they had enough Night to no longer be meat but not enough to qualify as even the lowest of the Mighty. Most of the dzulu were smart enough to surrender when people still covered with the blood of their overlords strolled into their camp, but they tended to be the ones that chafed under my rules the most. The prohibition on killing each other in particular: now that the old order was gone, they believed it was their chance to rise. I'd been inclined to just cut them loose, but Akua had talked me out of it. She'd pointed out that the nisi were largely incapable of fighting, but that the dzulu usually knew their way around a weapon. If I was to recruit an army in the

Everdark, it would not be from the Mighty or the nisi. It'd be from the hungry dzulu, who'd be willing to take oaths in exchange for enough Night to no longer be arrow fodder. They'd spent long enough near the corridors of power to be willing to do quite a bit if the deal allowed them to walk those corridors in their own right.

And so we had created the auction.

We took the corpses of the Mighty and allowed any and all to bid for the right to harvest their Night. Akua had been inclined to limit bidding rights to the dzulu so that a warrior class would be created quickly, but I'd been of a different opinion. The nisi were, in my eyes, the closest thing to sane people that could be found among the drow. Most of them had spent their lives being slaves in all but name and while they paid lip service to the ways of the Everdark their hearts weren't really in it. It was hard to love customs that saw you used a tools and beasts of burdens, killed at a whim. I'd rather have slightly less effective soldiers that *weren't* ardent partisans of methaphysical cannibalism. What would be bid, however, had never been in doubt. Coin would be useful, if I could bring it back to Callow, but drow society ran on barter and somewhat communal slave labour – nisi were the property of the sigil as a whole, not individuals, but what they made was distributed at the discretion of the sigil-holder. There were precious few easy riches to be had, down here, and unlike the dwarves I didn't have a legion of workers to mine every shaft full of metals and precious stones we came across. I'd not come to the Everdark for wealth anyway. I'd come here for an army, and so the bidding was done with *oaths*. Years in my service, enforced by blood and Winter. I was willing to empower the drow if it was on my terms. Two more sigils, I thought as I made my way through the tunnels, only two more sigils and we'd have enough numbers.

Then we'd hit the city of Lotow, and the boulder would start rolling down the hill.

Chapter 63

Initiation

> "Blood sacrifice is such an ugly term. I prefer to think of it a 'blood redistribution', a thriving new form of Imperial enterprise."
>
> Dread Empress Sinistra II, the Coy

"One hundred and sixty years, subjected to the full breadth of lesser and greater oaths," Akua said.

The nisi at her side, a one-eyed drow named Centon, repeated her words in Crepuscular loudly enough all those assembled below would hear them. Nearly seven hundred drow were seated respectfully on their knees, packed tightly on the cavern floor, but they were the most orderly crowd I'd ever seen. That many humans in a room would carry out hushed conversations among each other, even if there was a devil looking over them, and neither orcs nor goblins were very different. Goblins, in fact, might try to talk with the bloody devil. Not a single one of the drow had so much as let out a grunt except when bidding. The difference here, I thought, was cultural. Most surface people had an expectation they would not have their throat cut on a whim, while drow had lived their whole lives under a different set of unspoken rules. Life was the cheapest form of currency in the Everdark. Centon's words were not followed by another bid, though in truth I'd not expected one. One hundred and sixty years was fairly high for a rylleh. A sigil-holder's corpse could easily fetch as much as five centuries, but then it came with the understanding that a drow harvesting that much Night should easily be capable of living that long.

Diabolist and I both knew why the bidding for lesser corpses had risen. After it'd been made clear that titles like the one bestowed upon Ivah would only ever be considered for people who'd fought under me and sworn the full breadth of oaths, interest in even the lesser Mighty had significantly increased. The most ambitious among the dzulu wanted to be worth bringing along for the fight when we hit Great Lotow, judging the comprehensive oaths an acceptable shackle if it could lead to that greater ultimate payoff. The Lord of Silent Steps had made something of an impression when it'd gone through the upper ranks

of the Trovod like a hot knife through butter, and the lingering tales of that had led to regular polite inquiries on the subject of titles from both dzulu and the occasional nisi.

"Then Sekoran may rise to take the oaths, and this auction has come to an end," Akua said, after the silence continued for a full sixty heartbeats. "You may disperse."

Centon translated her words, and without a sound the drow below us knelt forward until their foreheads touched the floor. Not one rose before the winner – named Sekoran, apparently – was climbing up. They left in orderly files after that, neither jostling nor hurrying. Even though I'd made it clear that as far as I was concerned all of their kind were equal under my rules, the nisi still allowed the dzulu to leave ahead of them while expressing deference through tilts of the head lowering their gaze to the floor and presenting their neck. It meant, Akua had told me, that the nisi in question were offering their life and Night for harvest should their social superior wish it. Mostly a courtesy, as nisi were communal property of the sigil and not to be touched unless allowed by the sigil-holder, but here in the outer rings those customs were more loosely kept to. When the difference in power between rylleh and sigil-holder was thin, order tended to break down and killing nisi was often used as statement of rising or descending influence. The drow, I'd learned, made the Praesi fondness intrigue and blood sport look positively mild in comparison. Sekoran climbed up the rocky outcropping that'd served as our seat for the auction with poorly-hidden eagerness.

It was young, though it was hard to tell with drow. Sekoran did lack the kind of agelessly young look most Mighty had, though, its features still soft and lacking the harsh angles of a mature drow. The lifespan of their species was a headache and a half to understand. It was known that those who held no Night save that which they were born to would live exactly sixty years, much too clear-cut a lifespan to be natural. They called it the Three Faces: drow reached maturity at twenty and began their decline at forty, their bodies breaking down over those last twenty years until death took them at the exact age of sixty. Dzulu, like Sekoran's silver-touched eyes betrayed he was, could expect to live over a hundred years old. It was unheard of for even the lowest of the Mighty to die of old age, but some of the worst monsters in the inner ring were alleged to have lived over a millenium. The kid bowed after finishing the climb, first towards me then towards Akua. It allowed Centon to speak to it with contemptuous patience, though more than once I caught it glancing at the banner at my side while the nisi spoke. It'd made an impression, as it'd been meant to.

Drow did not take oaths, or make them, and so a few of the first dzulu to secure a corpse in the auction had treated their word a little too lightly. Three, to be precise. They'd tried to slay other drow under my banner, or hurt them. Their hideously twisted and frozen corpses had been hung from the long metal pole at my side, dangling softly back and forth. I'd not had to lift so much as a

finger to see them die. The oaths had seen to that, the sliver of Winter I'd put inside them devouring their bodies from the inside the moment they acted in a manner breaking their word. The Night they'd taken was still there, stirring as they dangled.

They'd started taking the oaths seriously after that.

"It is ready for the ceremony," Akua said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I glanced at the shade and nodded. She'd helped me with both the ritual and the wording of the oaths, putting her extensive experience with diabolism to slightly more acceptable use. As a sorcerous discipline, diabolism was as much about wordcraft as it was rituals: a binding could be technically flawless and still turn out to be completely worthless if there was a loophole in the protections it carried. There was a reason Praesi preferred summoning lesser devils when they could get away with it: the risks rose sharply when the devil was capable of thought. I'd agreed that making the oaths in Lower Miezan would be to our advantage, since neither of us mastered Crespuscular well enough to be able to understand all the nuances – or, to be frank, trusted any of our translators enough to let them shape the oaths in our stead. Centon would translate the words as well as it could, but the oaths and answers would be in my own native tongue. The ritual tools involved were, to Akua's open despair, rather crude and simple. A sharp obsidian knife, unadorned save for the leather grip, and a rough bowl of sandstone. More than once I'd caught her complaining under her breath that only a Callowan would 'try to subvert an entire civilization with kitchen utilities', but she'd get over it.

Or not, I didn't care either way. Her continued genteel horror was always good for a laugh.

The ceremony, if it could even be called that, was rather simple. I sliced the knife across my palm – normally I'd consider that horribly inconvenient, but my unusual physiology allowed me such dramatic liberties – and let the blood flow into the bowl. I handed the knife to Akua, who then passed it on to Sekoran. It followed suit, cutting too deep in its eagerness. There was no need to slide a piece of Winter into the mixture. My blood itself, I'd been forced to admit, was the stuff of Winter manifest.

"Sekoran of the Everdark, under this name and any name you have ever borne or will ever bear I bind you by these oaths," I said. "May they hold true for one hundred and sixty years, lest the power now bestowed devour you whole."

"I so swear," Sekoran spoke in heavily accented Lower Miezan after Centon translated for it.

"You will never slay nor harm nor hinder any in the service of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, or dwelling within Callow, save in your own defence or the pursuit of its laws," I said.

"I so swear."

"For the duration of one hundred and sixty years, you will follow the orders of the Sovereign of Moonless Nights without intent to subvert or pervert the

spirit in which they were given," I said.

"I so swear."

There were sixteen lesser oaths, all in all, and we moved through them briskly. Most of them were practical boundaries I needed to set before turning loose the murderous drow equivalent of the Watch on the surface for my campaigns. There would be no rape or wanton slaughter, protection of civilians would be enforced by magical oath and standards of decent behaviour thrust upon them. Akua had called it forging a facsimile of Callowan honour through threat of death. I called it refusing to create another batch of fae nobility if they weren't bound to behave the way nobility supposedly did. The greater oaths were only three, and it wouldn't be inaccurate to call them my *contingencies*. Black had taught me that there was always a point of failure hidden away in even the most stringent of plans, something unseen and unexpected that would come back to bite you at the worst possible time. Given the scope of what I was undertaking here, the sting of that bite would be equivalently brutal. If – when – this turned south on me, I needed levers to either sideline or end them. Fortunately, this time I was not negotiating with the most powerful woman on the continent while she was arguably at the height of her power. I was dealing with eager, desperate drow who craved what I had to offer so badly they could taste it.

The kind of people willing to make dangerous bargains.

"Until death, you will obey and enforce any and all terms of the Liesse Accords," I said.

"I so swear."

"The Sovereign of Moonless Night will once name a foe you must fight until it and all it commands is utterly destroyed," I said.

"I so swear."

"The Sovereign of Moonless Night will have right to ask one boon of you, to be carried out at all costs, and that right if unused can be passed down to others at its discretion," I said.

"I so swear."

Help, long-term plan, insurance. It was not fool-proof, but it was the best the finest diabolist of my generation had been able to help me craft.

"Then Sekoran of the Everdark is granted right to the corpse bargained for, and all Night held therein," I said. "By this compact we are now bound, and will remain bound."

The young drow shivered, and it had nothing to do with the coolness of the cavern air. There'd been power in the air, power running through its veins. Through mine as well. I glanced at Centon and nodded. The nisi spoke in Crepuscular, and guided the other drow towards the rylleh's corpse. Akua lingered, to my complete lack of surprise.

"Diabolist," I evenly said. "Report."

She sat at my side without need for an invitation.

"The food situation is out of control," Akua said. "We can last two more days, three if we ration even the children."

"We'll be seizing the Berelun reserve today," I said.

"And the Berelun themselves with it," she pointed out. "The speed at which we accrue bellies to fill vastly outstrips the quantity of food we're acquiring."

I nodded slowly. She wasn't wrong.

"I expect you're leading to a suggestion," I said.

"You were intent on hitting another two sigils before moving against Great Lotow," Diabolist said. "We cannot afford that. Perhaps one, if what passes for their granaries is large enough."

"We're still weak," I said.

"Our drow contingent will not be the cause of victory or defeat in Lotow, let us not pretend otherwise," she said. "A few more Mighty sworn to you will not make a significant difference either way."

Time and empty bellies. Along with coin, they were the enemies that most often imposed on my plans.

"Agreed," I sighed. "I'll send Archer to see if the Delen are more inclined to fighting than fleeing, we can decide from there."

"Sensible," she conceded with a nod. "As for the situation in the camp, it remains… fluid."

"Rarely a good word, when passing Praesi lips," I said.

She seemed amused by that, and did not deny it.

"The nisi remain cautiously grateful for the rules of behaviour you have imposed, though skeptical it will last," Akua said. "The situation with the dzulu, however, is fast reaching boiling point. The auction has worked, to an extent, but I would expect betrayals in the camp from ambitious elements the moment we run into solid opposition."

"You have names?" I asked.

"I am in the process of gathering them," Diabolist said. "Which remains difficult, as I lack eyes to watch on my behalf. I must rely almost entirely on rumours and observation of social currents – observations, I will remind you, made without appropriate cultural context."

"Still angling for your little death squad, I see," I said.

"There is no nation or large-scale organization on Calernia that does not have individuals charged with internal surveillance," Akua said. "Including Callow under your reign, Catherine. Drow being notably more fractious than humans, to establish such a measure is mere common sense. We both know the longer we wait the larger this will become and the harder it will be to track would-be traitors. It must be done, and done quickly."

"Not to revisit our last argument, but I still don't trust dzulu to keep an eye on their own kind," I frankly replied. "And for them to have right of life and death inside the camp would carry obvious dangers."

"I have come to understand and somewhat agree with your perspective in this," Diabolist said. "Which is why I would amend my previous request. I

would like ten ispe corpses from the next… acquisition to be set aside for raising nisi of my own picking. They can be charged with the duty, after being subjected to a strict set of oaths."

"That'll take the wind out of the next auction," I said.

"It will also make it clear that there is more than one way to rise in your service," Akua said. "A useful tool, if the notion is properly conveyed."

I clenched my fingers, then slowly unclenched them. She was right about the risks of leading a pack of drow without anyone charged with keeping an eye on them. Knives pointed at our back weren't just likely at this rate, they were inevitable.

"Agreed for the corpses," I said. "We'll discuss the hierarchy of that fresh batch of spies and assassins after the Berelun have been brought into the fold."

I was disinclined to let Akua Sahelian head what would effectively be my equivalent of the Jacks down here, but I might not have another choice. Ivah was another possible candidate, but I might need it on the frontlines and my leash on Diabolist was arguably tighter. In the end I could dislike it all I wanted but who else was there?

"One last subject, if you would," Akua said.

Evidently she'd noticed my attention was waning.

"I'm listening," I said.

"I would ask for one more ispe to be set aside," she said. "For Centon to harvest."

"Your assistant," I frowned. "It should have enough status from that position alone, and I can't think of another reason why you'd want to empower it."

"It is being treated as a nisi favoured by one of higher status, not an individual to be respected outside that very narrow boundary," Akua noted. "The casual disrespect it is still offered grates me and hinders its work besides. Status as one of the lesser Mighty would neatly remedy that."

And also allow her to sink deeper hooks into the rest of the drow through Centon, a notion I was much less pleased about. Keeping Diabolist useful without giving her too much power was ever a delicate balancing act.

"If you were serious about promoting for reasons other than martial talent, you will hardly find a better candidate," Akua said. "It was careful enough to hide it held the Secret of Lower Miezan for more than twenty years."

"No one's born with a full Secret," I grunted. "Not even literacy, and that's the most common there is. It whet its blade a few times to complete that."

"You might as well chide a Praesi for diabolism," she replied amusedly.

My brow rose.

"How's your heart, Akua?" I said.

"Ever in your hand, dearest, in more ways than one," she smoothly replied.

I rolled my eyes.

"I'll see if I can spare an ispe, but that's unlikely until Lotow," I said. "Make do until then."

"By your will, my queen," she said.

"Because *that's* not getting old," I muttered.

I rose to my feet. Time to finish cleaning up the Berelun, then. Archer would be getting restless by now.

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"You're angry," Indrani said. "It told Ivah you'd be angry."

"First off, I very much doubt that," I replied.

"That's fair," she mused. "I mean, I *was* lying."

"Yours is the laziest, sloppiest form of treachery I have ever countered," I said. "I can't believe that's a mark in your favour, but Gods help me it is. Anyhow, I'm not angry. Surprised? No, surprised is too weak a word. *Befuddled*."

"I mean, you left us alone without supervision so when you really think about it who's really at fault?" Indrani said.

There was a pause.

"You. You are that fault. That was what I was implying," she revealed.

"I left you two alone for two hours and a half tops, Archer," I complained. "How the Hells did you end up 'accidentally' taking over another sigil?"

What the Berelun called their stronghold was, practically speaking, a plateau inside a tall cavern with a passage through drilled under it. To reach the part where the drow had actually lived – the top of the plateau, more specifically a knot of descending stalactites and stalagmites that'd fused into some sort of stone tree around which all the Berelun tents and structures were centered – would normally have required climbing a sheer cliff, but there were benefits to being made of smoke and mirrors. Like growing wings at will. When I'd first realized that Archer and Ivah had proceeded ahead of me I'd expected to find the stronghold cleared of the last Mighty and terrified drow awaiting instructions. The second part of that, at least, had come true. The first had not, since I was currently looking at around thirty Mighty of varying ranks kneeling on the stone with their hands behind their necks.

"There's a very good explanation for that," Indrani assured me.

My brow rose, and I gestured for her to speak. Silence persisted.

"I can't think of a believable lie," she admitted after a moment.

"Have you considered giving me an actual truthful accounting?" I suggested.

"What is this, a bloody House of Light?" she complained, then her eyes brightened. "Although, if you're willing to wear ripped up sister robes I'm more than willing to give you my *confessions*."

"Just give me your godsdamned report, Archer," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"Fine," she pouted. "So I was, like, making small talk with Ivah while surrounded by corpses."

"As one does," I said.

"Right? We never go anywhere without there being corpses around, we should work on that," she said. "Anyways, it was all like 'Archer, you peerless

beauty whose charm has moved me, I'm going to brag so you become interested me'."

"Classic Ivah," I agreed.

"And so it mentioned that Bere-whatever tried to convince it to stab you," Indrani said. "Offered it fourth place in the local pecking order."

Probably the only accurate part of what she'd reported so far, though I would not hold out hope for that trend to continue.

"So then, I was like all 'Ivah, please, don't be so obvious it's just embarrassing'. But then I figured – wait, fourth? That's pretty high up. Burley-whatever brought two rylleh with a bunch of mooks and Ivah hadn't done much to show power at that point. Unless it was real bare back on the home front, Shirley-whatever was full of it when it made that promise."

The worst part, I thought, was that she was perfectly aware that the name of the sigil and sigil-holder had been Berelun. She was yanking my chain. I knew that. She knew I knew that. And I knew that she knew I knew that. Yet if I actually corrected her I would lose, and that was just unacceptable.

"So you went on a walk," I prompted.

"Well, technically you said to keep an eye on the corpses and the corpses were gone by then," Indrani said. "So really you have only yourself to blame."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that," I grunted. "There's plenty of blame to go around."

"Look, when we found the Troubadours they were already under attack by this other bunch of drow," Indrani protested. "So you know, I defended the innocent. As is my custom."

"I don't suppose you bothered to learn the context for all this," I tried.

"I knew you'd say that," she crowed. "So I wrote it down."

She pulled back her coat and mail sleeve, revealing red scribbles. I blinked.

"Archer, is that *blood*?"

"Which do we run into more often down here: dead bodies or inkwells?" she pointed out. "It's like you don't even think, sometimes. Anyways, here it is. The Dubious-"

Delen, I mentally corrected, which was the nearest sigil to this tone.

"- have been all warlike recently, and slapped the Henries in the face in a skirmish a while back, a defeat bad enough that it cleaned up most of their Mighty."

Had we really gone from 'Bere-whatever' to 'Henries' in the span of thirty heartbeats? I was in dire need of a way to exact pretty revenge on Indrani, it was the only language she truly understood.

"When they heard the Henries were moving out to speak with us, they decided it was a good time to attack," Indrani continued. "But they're blind and their timing is shit-"

The stronghold of the Berelun was difficult to access and finding out precisely when they'd gone to ambush me was difficult, I mentally translated.

"- so they were only just getting started when me and Ivah showed up," she said.

"Ivah and I," I said. "You ignorant wench."

She flipped me off. My gaze returned to the kneeling drow, who'd been watching us talk back and forth very carefully.

"And you what, killed enough of them that the rest gave up?" I asked.

"We protected the innocent until surrender ensued," Indrani proudly replied, then spoiled the way she'd kept her face straight through that by badly winking.

"Fuck it," I sighed. "We'll offer them the usual 'oath or sword' bargain then loot everything before we get back on the road."

"Yes sir, your queenliness ma'am," Archer grinned. "We decided on where we're headed, then?"

"Great Lotow," I told her. "I hope you're in a fighting mood, because we're about to declare war on an entire civilization."

The smile she gave me at that was terrifying in more ways than one, but at least she was on my side.

The drow wouldn't be so lucky.

Chapter 64

Momentum

> "When in doubt, attack. When doubtless, attack as well."
>
> Bastien de Hauteville, Proceran general

Great Lotow was nothing like I'd expected.

All I'd seen of the drow so far was raised stones and the occasional clever exploitation of natural features, and so my expectations had been rather low before I took my first look at one of their 'cities'. I'd believed it would be a few half-ruined structures and perhaps a surviving set of walls, but the Lotow I was looking upon served as a reminder that the Everdark had once been an empire in its own right. I'd thought of the term city in the Callowan sense, a gathering of houses and streets with marketplaces and maybe a decent set of ramparts. But that was a surface way of looking at things, wasn't it? Up there, cities were built in breadth. Spreading when the population rose. The drow had instead built in depth, in a way that would have been impossible in the land of my birth.

Great Lotow was built in levels, that was the easiest way to describe it. The heart of the city was a massive pit with a spire of stone in the centre, from base to summit large as a small fortress. From that tree radiates branch-like bridges leading to districts carved directly into the rock across the chasm, their sizes variable. Closer to the bottom I could glimpse districts large as Summerholm itself serving as farms and lakes, while closer to the centre the holes in the rock were more like neighbourhoods of carved houses. At its peak, I thought, Lotow must have had several hundred thousand drow living in it. Now, though, most of it was abandoned. Some of the bridges linking the spire to the sides had been broken and though some were replaced by rope bridges made of some kind of pale weed many more had simply been left gaping, the districts they led to now empty ruins.

It was a moving sight, I would admit. The structure of the city alone would have been impressive, but the ancient drow had made of Lotow a work of art. There was hardly a wall or floor that was not filled by a mosaic or bas-relief,

stalactites and stalagmites had been carved into painted statues of drow and animals. Entire spans of ceiling had been set with coloured stones and gems to create a sky, and there were tall steles showing spindly sentences in Crepuscular reciting old stories and ballads where my people would have placed street signs instead. Ivah had told me that last detail was an old drow custom: streets had once been known by the never-mentioned titles of the written work on the stele, every drow expected to be well-taught enough to know it at a glance.

Now, though, those old stories were painted over with blood red runes to mark where territories began and ended. Metal and precious stones had been ripped out of statues and mosaics, carvings older than Callow left to erode under the depredations of elements and time. Stone houses that collapsed were not raised anew but covered with skins and leathers as half-tents while ancient temples and mansions lay cracked open, their heavy stones used to make walls of piled rock. And still, after centuries and millennia, Great Lotow endured. Long winding aqueducts rival to any of Miezan make descended along the sides of the pit and provided water to cisterns and fountains, sewers unlike I'd ever seen sent filth towards the lower farms without overflowing or clogging after what must have been centuries of disrepair. There was no city like this in Callow, I thought. Not even in Praes, who had been under Miezan occupation and so benefitted from that empire's fondness for great civil works. Great Lotow would have been the crown jewel of any surface nation, the envy of the continent.

Down here, it was just one more decaying corpse in the pile. It was a sorrowful sort of awe that I felt. *Would we have raised cities like this, if we were not always at war?* I wondered. Callow had little to boast of save for cathedrals and fortresses. The bridges linking Summerholm were a wonder, to be sure, but a Miezan one. Sometimes I could see why the rest of Calernia called us backwards peasants. We were so much less than we could have been. Praes too, I thought. There was so much potential in the Empire, if it would just cease devouring itself every other decade. So much knowledge and skill, always turned to acts of self-immolation that took chunks of the continent along with it.

"You're being quiet," Indrani said.

"It's a lot to take in," I replied.

"Eh," my friend shrugged. "After Keter the bar's been raised. Gonna take more than pretty ruins to impress me."

"We walk through the grave of an empire," I murmured. "That's worth a moment of contemplation."

"Oh, there's still people down there," Indrani mused. "For now. I don't see this lot surviving a firm assault from the dwarves, if we don't get them moving."

There *were* still drow, it was true. A mere pittance compared to what Lotow must have kept in olden days, but our new acquisitions form the departed Delen Sigil had estimated twenty thousand people here and I believed that was a conservative number. The larger sigils reigned close to the bottom, where the old farms could be kept going and so allow for more nisi to be held, but that

didn't necessarily mean the deeper sigils were the most powerful. Mighty Delen and its tribe had been intending to have a go at claiming territory on the outskirts of Lotow within the decade, and so interrogation had wielded more information than I'd expected. The central spire – called an overly-long word meaning 'column' in Crepuscular – wasn't the territory of any single sigil, as whoever held it would have a massive advantage over rivals, but the rest of the inhabited city had been carved up between the ten sigils that inhabited it. The weakest, and the one we'd go after first, was the Urulan Sigil. They'd once ruled a few of the central districts, but after being evicted by a stronger sigil they'd moved upwards and devoured the sigil that had previously ruled the part of Lotow called the Crossroads.

If the city was a cylinder from which districts sprouted, then the Crossroads was the circle atop that cylinder, connected through the central Column by four broad bridges. Nearly every tunnel in the region led to the Crossroads, including the one where we currently stood, though the Hallian ways that had once been the highways of the drow empire were linked to Lotow's bottom level instead. Which was unfortunate, since I intended to go through those. The Crossroads were arguably the city's second most important strategic point, but highly unpopular territory for a sigil to hold: since near every tunnel led to them, any ambitious sigil trying to get into the Lotow scrap would begin by taking a swing at whoever held them. Word was that a sigil holding them could expect slow and steady decline through constant conflict until either a sigil of the outer ring managed to mount a strong enough assault or a sigil on the losing side of a conflict deeper down moved up and evicted the latest occupants – much as the Urulan themselves had done.

Sadly, the Urulan Sigil had been force to migrate less than twenty years ago. They might be a wreck compared to any of the deeper sigils, but they would have maintained enough strength they'd make any of the fights I'd picked in the Everdark so far look like child's play.

"The city will be tricky to assault," I finally said.

"Gotta take the Crossroads before we go at it seriously," Indrani noted, squinting down. "That'll be ugly fighting, mark my words."

I did not disagree. Though that section of the city was a single ring going around the edges of the pit holding the Column, it wasn't flat grounds. Large rectangular halls were tightly clustered, with small streets and broader avenues between them. Easy to defend, to force the attacker in a bottleneck.

"We'll have to split our force in two," I said. "Sweep the ring from both sides. I'll need you to lead one of the assaults."

She shot me a curious look.

"Who am I getting as a lieutenant, Diabolist or Ivah?"

"You get Akua," I grunted. "I imagine I'll need a translator more than you."

"Sure," she snorted. "Let's pretend that's true. We certain we want no one keeping an eye on the bridges?"

That was the large risk here, I thought. The odds that a deeper sigil would be willing to send its Mighty against an attacker it hadn't properly looked over were low – sigils prone to taking those kinds of gambles didn't tend to last long. They weren't non-existent, however, and it might change the situation if they learned that it was a human leading the charge. Still, I couldn't afford to let the Urulan run or concentrate their forces. *But can I afford to be flanked halfway through?* Not really, no. After Archer had 'acquired' the Delen Sigil and we'd gathered the people from both them and the Berelun, our numbers had doubled: a little over four thousand drow were now under my banner. Of those, I counted three hundred and change dzulu and twenty-three Mighty of varying ranks. It wasn't a small force, by the standards of the outer ring, but all the real players down here were either in a city or the inner ring. We wouldn't be fighting dregs, this time. If we ended up going against two real sigils at the same time…

"Fair point," I said. "Change of plans. I want you to sweep a quarter of the ring, then stop in front of the bridge and keep an eye on what's happening."

"To put arrows in the curious and the runners, if there happen to be any," Indrani sighed. "Ugh, I always get the shit jobs."

"You'd get bored scything through dzulu," I countered. "Besides, feel free to take shot from your perch at anything getting in my way."

"Slightly better," she conceded.

The two of us remained standing there for a while, strangers in this broken land looking down at a once-great city. I would have called the moment solemn, if not for the fact that Indrani was pulling at a flask of liquor. She sighed in satisfaction, then rolled her shoulders.

"All right," Archer said. "We doing this or what?"

"Don't get yourself killed," I reminded her, meeting hazelnut eyes with my own.

"Never have before," Indrani drawled. "So, you know, if we go purely by precedent it only makes sense that I'm immortal."

While pushing her over the tunnel's edge would have been deeply satisfying, we did have a battle to win. I settled for freezing her flask solid instead, grinning at the muttered imprecations that followed.

—

Steel-clad boots hit the ground, and I slowed long enough to have a look at my warriors – and they were definitely that, not a soldier among them. One hundred dzulu, moving like large hunting cats with their spears and swords in hand, barely a dozen shields among them. Thirteen Mighty, most of them ispe with only a single jawor and a pair of freshly-harvested rylleh to serve as heavy hitters. My Lord of Silent Steps led the pack from the front, and they slowed along with me without a word.

"Ivah," I said. "Translate. The old terms apply: nisi are not to be touched save in self-defence, surrenders are to be accepted and observed. Anyone they

kill, they can take. Corpses of my own making go to auction, and I will personally execute any who reaps their Night."

Not exactly the most inspirational of speeches, but then with drow I'd found it more important to lay down rules than tug at heartstrings. They had precious few of either, and the latter was beyond my ability to fix. The words were repeated in Crepuscular, and within a heartbeat of the sentence ending the first shot of the battle for Great Lotow was fired. A javelin, thrown from a rooftop maybe half a hundred feet ahead. Aimed towards me, which meant either it was a warning to the drow or they'd already caught on to the fact I was running things. I could have simply stepped aside – it was aimed at my centre of mass, well-thrown but barely any better than a mundane human could have – but sometimes it was necessary to make an impression and... set the tone. I let it arc downwards, and at the last moment caught the shaft. Less than an inch stood between the sharp stone tip and my plate. Casually, I spun the javelin around between my fingers and gripped it correctly. One step, lowering my body, then rising up I threw the javelin back.

It, uh, wasn't something I was trained in. I had better aim and certainly more body strength than I'd used to, but that didn't translate to skill. It flew like a damned crossbow bolt, in a straight line, and was easily dodged by the silhouette on the rooftop. Still, at least no other projectile had followed. It was a start. I flicked my wrist, forming a blade of frost, and advanced.

"Forward," I ordered, Ivah translating a heartbeat afterwards.

Archer would begin her own sweep the moment we engaged the enemy properly, so all I had to worry about was the world in front of me. I went down the slope at a pace, and entered the avenue briskly. Already the Urulan had prepared a reception. A dozen dzulu led by a drow roiling with Night – Mighty, and stronger than ispe – were spread out in a loose crescent with with Mighty at the tip. I'd missed this, I realized. The simplicity of it. Enemies ahead, allies behind. No tricky little shades of morality, no debate over right and necessity. It was like I'd been whisked back to the Pit and its much less complicated time. I felt a savage grin split my lips, and for the first time in ages I could savour the air in my lungs. The glorious burn of it, illusion that it was. I'd keep it going as long as I could. I darted forward, dashing around another javelin and closing the distance in mere heartbeats. The Mighty yelled and Night flared, the sound reverberating, but instead of ducking I plunged into it. My eardrums burst and reformed in the same moment, and the last I saw of that drow was the look of utter surprise on its face when my sword carved through its throat.

The dzulu immediately began retreating, faces gone pale, but I was having none of that. I moved faster than them, and the first I caught before it could even turn to strike me. My hand went through its back and I snapped its spine, withdrawing bloodied fingers. The next struck at me with spear, but I let the stone tip bounce off my plate and slapped its cheek hard enough the neck broke. The third tried to parry my strike, but while the blades were at the right angle the difference in strength made it pointless. Its arm was forced

down, and a flick of the wrist had its head rolling on the floor. My own drow joined the fray eagerly, falling on the survivors like wolves on the fold, but I pressed on. I'd not come here to make sport of dzulu. Archer would be going to the right, so my charge was to sweep by the left. Already yells were sounding in the distance, the Urulan gathering for war, but I did not intend to give them the opportunity of mustering a proper resistance. Through halls and houses I strode, ears sharp, and caught my first ambusher. Atop one of those long halls, pressed closely against the roof. Laughing, I struck at the wall and tore through the stone. It rose, alarmed, and I leapt up.

Just a dzulu, I saw, eyes barely touched with silver. Disappointed, I snatched it by the neck before it could bring up its weapon and tossed it further down the avenue. It hit stone with a loud squelch, head pulped. I leapt back down, noting my forces were beginning to catch up. The first enemies had been too heavily outnumbered to put up a real fight. I took the lead, moving down the avenue. We hadn't even taken a fifth of the circle yet, but I found the resistance to have been too lukewarm. Someone had sent expendable to probe out strength while they prepared a response. My instincts proved right maybe sixty heartbeats later, when I found the length of the ring had been walled up. Thin walls of hide held by a framework of glue and stone, but they were decent makeshift fortifications to block off the streets and avenues. Atop the roofs drow with bows and javelins were awaiting, while the streets behind the hide blocks slowly filled with reinforcements. The first chokepoint to break, then. They'd made a kill zone at ground level – the hide panels were likely movable to let through their own warriors – so I'd go at it from a different angle.

I leapt back up on the nearest rooftop and broke into a run. Best to soften up this lot before my drow ran into them. Arrows and javelins streaked the air, which bothered me little – they were loud and slow and my body was mist whenever I wished. They might as well have been shooting at a ghost. I closed the distance and then streaks of Night began lashing out towards me, which was more dangerous. I suspected the mist trick would fail against sorcery, and this was as close as drow could get to magic. There were, by the looks of it, seven casters. I could take the hits and barrel through, most likely, but the knowledge that my body was exceedingly difficult to permanently damage nowadays had not whisked away Black's earliest lessons. *Never take a blow unless you have to, much less if you do not know what it will do.* A platform served as anchor for the push that sent me to crash into the house beneath which the archers and casters were standing. Momentum alone would not get me through that wall, even in plate, so instead I formed a spike of ice at an angle and caught it with my free hand. A spin had me leaping back upwards, the looks on the faces of the drow when I came of height with them most amusing. Another platform – just in time to avoid a second set of Night streaks – had me landing in a roll among them.

The dzulu, for that was what most of them were, scattered immediately. I didn't have the time to go through them one at a time, so I dipped into Winter

and let loose a working. The rings of sharp ice spears formed around my abdomen, lingering for a moment before shooting out. Blood, screams and shredded flesh followed in their wake. I had to throw myself to the side when looked like a snake made of Night ran through where I'd been a heartbeat earlier, jaws snapping. Another two follow suit, keeping me dancing, and to my distaste a streak of Night clipped me on the shoulder as I landed in a roll. It went straight through the plate, though at an angle that meant it hit air instead of flesh after punching through. Seven casters, I found, the only ones not dead or running. The snakes were coming out of their bellies, coiling and releasing at their will, while the other four drow were shooting shorter bursts to keep me from closing distance. Irritating. If they were Mighty, which was likely, they weren't far up the ranks. I didn't have time to waste on these when the real threats were still on the loose.

I sidestepped another streak, ducked under a snake and exerted my will. The drow guiding the snake found its throat filled with ice and began clawing at its skin impotently. I caught another snake-charmer and one of the shooters before being forced to move again. Darting around a snaked extended sharply like an arrow shot I ran forward, rolling under another streak of Night and responding with a collar of ice around the second drow's neck that tightened and immediately choked it. They'd needed the numbers to keep me busy, they realized too late as I carved through the throat of the last snake-charmer. The remaining two tried to make a run for it but I pursued, shaping my sword into a spear and tossing it in the first's back. The last survivor leapt down from the roof and I sighed. Its throat filled with ice a moment later and it dropped. The whole of it could not had taken more than seventy heartbeats, and now my own sigil was assaulting the barricades. I casually formed an anvil of ice and dropped it on the nearest hide wall to make an easy point of entry. I supposed I could clear out the dzulu a bit to make it easier on my warriors.

Then the roof under my feet turned into Night, and the Mighty of the Urulan Sigil entered the fray.

Chapter 65

Impact

"'lo and behold, I have brought peace to the Empire."

Dread Empress Massacre, after ordering the Burning of Okoro

Three things happened in swift succession.

The first was that I formed a handhold of ice to hoist myself up. I wasn't sure what would happen if I stayed standing in the middle of a blanket of Night, but it was unlikely to be pleasant. The second was that, even as my fingers closed around the handhold, it began vibrating and exploded with a scream. The third thing, unfortunately, was that I fell back into that same blanket of Night spread over the roof. Feet first, which turned out to be a stroke of luck. The moment they made contact with the Night they... dissolved, like they'd been dropped in acid. I dimmed my mind, turning into mist, and slithered away towards the edge of the roof. It was difficult to think, in that state, and my situational awareness was shit – as was made clear by the fact that I neither saw nor heard coming the spear of Night that caught me in the side. Or as close to a side as I could have, while made of mist. The second unpleasant surprise of the day – night? – unfolded as the spear forced me back into solid form where it struck and sent my human-like silhouette to go tumbling over the side. Into a pack of dzulu, though that didn't prove to be much of a problem.

Night spread over the street with a soft whisper and they dissolved screaming even as I fell.

I formed a spike of ice jutting out of a house's sidewall and landed on it for exactly a heartbeat before it broke with a scream, but it'd been enough to allow me to situate myself. A pair of translucent blue wings ripped out of my back and I flew upwards, finally getting a look at the drow that'd ambushed me. There were three, all holding so much Night within their thin frames they darkened their surroundings just by being there: the air around them looked like near-invisible wisps of smoke was spreading through it. The two on the sides looked like they could have been twins, their deep grey skin and whip-like faces identical save for the crescent scars they had on opposite cheeks.

Their eyes were pure silver, save for the black pupils. Long curved blades in hand, they watched me rise with identical bored expressions. If those two were strong, holding enough Night to fill a pond, then the drow between them was a lake. Taller than either of them, its faces was covered with thick burned flesh in a horrid mask that denied even the appearance of lips. There was no trace of anything but silver in its eyes, the pupils merely a darker shade of it.

"Urulan?" I called out.

"Cattle," it mildly replied in Crepuscular.

Well, that took care of the introductions. I'd go out on a limb and say the flankers were rylleh, because with that much power they could hardly be anything else. Mighty Urulan wielded a long staff of glass, and without bothered with any more banter pointed it at me. Droplets of Night formed around me in a ring-like pattern, rippling with power, and I definitely wasn't sticking around to find out what that did. I'd already noticed that the flesh dissolved by the earlier blanket had taken longer than usual to reform after I'd returned to physical form, and that'd been the *opening* volley. It could be it'd opened with its strongest trick, true. But when had I ever been that lucky? The wings folded against my back and I dropped like a stone, which didn't help nearly as much as I'd wished. The Night droplets rippled, and every single one of them lanced out with a beam of the same stuff downwards. The firing angle had been well-judged: I'd be falling right into the thickest knot of beams if I didn't act. My wings spread again, but I held back a curse when they both began vibrating and broke a heartbeat later. Neither the rylleh had moved, but their silver eyes shone brighter. Time to improvise, then. Mist-form wasn't getting me out of this, so the time for delicate works was over.

I formed a large cube of ice under me, feeling Winter's influence begin to creep and promptly shunting it off, and even as the beams of Night tore into the frost I parted it around my falling form to go straight through. A whisper came to my ears, the sound of another Night blanket forming below me, and the cube began to vibrate. Distraction first, I thought. I ripped out a chunk of ice from the bottom of the cube with an exertion will, transmuted it into mist and sent it slithering to the left. The ice ceased vibrating a pair of Night spears shot out, and there was my opening. I fell under the itself-falling cube as the beams of Night shot through it, muscles tightening as I caught it with a grunt and tossed the entire thing at the drow. I couldn't spare the time to look if I'd made impact, instead forming wings again and plunging into a somewhat-controlled descent that had me landing in front of the three drow. And, most importantly, away from the Night blanket. They'd already shown me it did not discriminate in its effect, they shouldn't be able to use it when I closed distance.

By the time my bare feet hit the ground – my boots were sadly gone for the foreseeable future, *again* – all that was left of the ice I'd thrown was a rain of mist and shards. I'd not even seen how they'd gotten rid of it. With me in the open, the earlier distraction had come to an end: all three drow had their eyes on me. *The rylleh first*, I thought. Urulan would be less dangerous without

the backup. I darted towards the left one, body centre low, and made it three feet forward before they unleashed their arsenal. Darkness fell like a curtain, robbing me of my sight, but my ears still worked just fine. It was the only reason I heard the low whistling sound of Night on the move, dropping to the floor and feeling something scythe just above my body. I rolled forward just in time to avoid the spike of Night that came down in the other working's wake, letting out a sharp breath. If they'd timed that just a little better, I would have taken it right in the spine. Another step saw me coming out of the curtain of darkness, which was no comfort as I saw my foes for only a heartbeat before a whisper sounded and a globe of Night began forming around me.

If that was the acid trick again...

I realized, dimly, that if this went through entirely I might actually die. I'd treated the Everdark like a training exercise, sometimes almost a game, but I'd been swimming in the shallows of this sea. There were monsters in the deeps that would make these look like imps. I close my eyes and let Winter loose. Frost formed all over my body, rapidly thickening and then shooting out. They had a globe of Night, I had a globe of ice. In a pissing contest of raw power, I'd bet on me every time. The Night ate into the ice but I kept pouring out Winter, its delighted laughter sounding softly in my ears. At first it devoured quicker than I made, but I dug in my heels and truly let loose. It became even, and I felt my blood turn cold as I dug even deeper. Like skin bursting for being filled too much, the globe of Night came apart under the pressure of the ice and I launched out through the opening I'd made. For a moment I hung in the air, seeing two curved swords rising to point at me and Urulan itself leisurely leaning on its staff. I shaped an ice javelin and threw it at the sigil-holder, just quick enough to loose it before shackles of Night formed around my wrists and ankles. I turned to mist, or at least tried to. The Night shackles thickened and nothing happened. Urulan gently tapped its staff against the ground and the javelin shattered into mist, the rylleh moving as it did.

Their stances were perfect, muscles coiling as they simultaneously thrust their blades into my sides. They went through the plate, bit into flesh, and then I felt my organs began to vibrate. I grit my teeth and hardened my insides, but that actually made it worse: it was like a sharper full of metal scraps went off in there. Everything was shredded, and chunks of my ribs and flesh splattered the floor as they withdrew their swords. Urulan pointed its staff at me, and tissue already knitting itself back together stopped. *Stupid*, I thought. *Stupid, stupid*. I'd already known there were drow who could heal themselves like I did, but I'd never entered my mind that the Mighty could have tricks that would inhibit my own ability. They just needed to keep taking me apart, and sooner or later they'd get me into a state I wouldn't walk away from.

Then an arrow went through my left wrist, breaking the shackle holding it on the way, and I promised myself I was going to kiss Indrani next time I saw her.

"My turn," I growled.

My mangled wrist flicked, forming a blade of ice, and I carved through my other shackled wrist before offering my ankles the same courtesy. The rylleh wreathed their blades with Night and stabbed into my open torso, pinning me down with what felt like a similar trick, but they really should have gone for the arms. I caught the flat of one sword and ice crept up it, shattering three fingers before the rylleh dropped it and retreated. There was a whisper and another globe of Night began forming around me, which given my current lack of feet was something of an issue. So I took care of it, forming feet out of ice and throwing myself out of the jaws of death. The second rylleh was not so lucky, and died screaming as it dissolved inside. I picked its blade out of my ribs, dropping it down, and finally my torso began putting itself back together. I stomped down and mist billowed out, covering all three of us, though not before I noticed the rylleh who'd lost fingers had already regrown them. Still, I'd learned another weakness to the Night-acid trick. When it began forming, it could not be stopped. Urulan would not have lost one of its lieutenants otherwise.

I shed off the last of my ice-forged feet and padded softly on the stone, feeling the drow through their warmth where my eyes found no purchase. The sigil-holder had only barely moved – it'd retreated a bit, nothing more – but the rylleh was circling around me. Could they sense Winter, as I could sense the Night? The powers were not so different. No, I decided. They would already have struck otherwise. Their senses might be sharper than those of other drow, though, so I'd have to be careful. I'd begin with Urulan's last helper. I crept forward quietly, circling it as it believed it was circling me, and only struck when facing its back. I could use mist, I had learned, if it was of my own making. It was just another facet of my mantle. And so I condensed it into ice over the rylleh's body, spooking it enough it dropped down into a puddle of shadow – and that was when I struck. A spear of ice forced it back into drow-form, and by then I was upon it. That transient moment where it stopped being shadow and started being a drow again? They were nearly blind during that, having to reorient all their senses. I didn't give it the time: my blade went through its throat, severed the spine, and I ripped off the head afterwards just to make sure it wouldn't heal. Amusingly enough, it did. Both separate parts closed up with fresh skin, though it remained quite dead.

Urulan spoke a single word in Crepuscular, and just like that I was back in the deep end.

I'd wondered why it was being so prudent, after being so aggressive since the start. Because it was preparing a major working, as it turned out. The mist had robbed my enemies of their sight, but it had also given the drow materials to work with – something I only realized was a very bad idea when my own mist began burning at my flesh. It'd turned the whole fucking thing into acid, hadn't it? My eyes were the first thing to go, but I could feel the mist eating at me all over. Worst, I couldn't just reform my way through it: the Night slowed that down, and the acid was eating at me quicker than I healed. This was worse than fighting Praesi mages, I thought. Those might be able to make wards, but

they weren't nearly this quick or vicious. Considering Urulan had likely been at this for centuries it only made sense, but that absent-minded consideration did nothing to help me out of my current predicament. Hardening my flesh, which was difficult when not contained to smaller body parts, did little to stop the problem. Slowed it some, but not enough to turn the tide. Gritting my teeth, I turned into mist myself but was forced back into human-form not even a heartbeat later. With fresh acid burns all over to show for it.

Fuck. Right, if I couldn't flee it then I had to move it. I'd lost all of my plate by now, which was infuriating but not as much as the fact that most my face muscles were bare and falling apart. I was melting like snow in summer sun. I formed of ice a large windmill and set it to spinning, which drew back the mist closest to me and bought me a moment until Urulan clapped down its staff and broke it without a word. Still, thinned was good enough for what I'd intended. Wings ripped out of my back for the third time today and I rose out of the mist. The problem, now, was that I was literally flying blind with someone waiting to take a shot at me. I couldn't just keep rising, that'd be painting a target on my back, so I zig-zagged erratically as my face slowly grew back. Even if I got hit, I thought, by the time I got back on my feet I'd be ready to fight again. Unfortunately, Urulan agreed. The sound of mist billowing forward came to my ears, and I realized it was pursuing me with the cloud. All right, desperate measures then. I flipped directions and went crashing straight towards the ground, hoping to… ah, there it was, a rooftop. My blood and flesh made a mess on the tiles, but I punched my way through and landed in a sprawl below.

Screams, people running away. Nisi? They hadn't tried to fight anyway. I wildly sprayed ice where I'd crashed through and crouched close to the floor. I just needed to wait this out, I thought, though every passing moment where the mist hadn't caught up was ratcheting up the tension in my frame. My eyes finally formed again, and I let out a relieved sigh. I'd made it. Through the ice-patched hole in the roof I could see the acid mist was surrounding the building, which was my first warning sign. Urulan wouldn't have bothered unless it intended to flush me out. Night flared above me, a beacon to my eldritch senses, and I cursed under my breath. It wasn't just going to flush me out, it was going to shattered the damned thing and drown me in acid again. I wouldn't be able to dodge that. I had to convince it to strike elsewhere instead. I wove glamour, two separate workings. I sent an image of myself through the ice, wreathed in a blue halo that would serve as cheap explanation why she wasn't melting. Too cheap, too obvious. A look to the side revealed there was an open door to my left, with five corpses where the nisi had tried to flee and been caught by the mist instead. Through there I sent another illusion of me, this one discreet and melding with the shadows. Almost invisible. She ran for the other on the other side of the street.

It evaporated a moment after she entered in a burst of Night that shook the entire Crossroads and collapsed the wall of the house I was really in.

The glamour had been dispersed by the hit, and I dispersed the one above

as well. Crouching low behind loose stones, I wove one last glamour: my own skeleton, slowly growing back its flesh. Spikes of Night fell down around it in a circle and there was a swell of power. Biting my lip, I slowed the regeneration to a crawl in the glamour. I wasn't sure if that had been what the trick was intended for, but I'd have to guess. Urulan approached slowly, its glass staff pointed at my fake body and quietly I formed a sword. I waited until it was standing over my illusion, staff raised, before I attacked. Had it been its senses or a discrepancy in effect that tipped it off? I might never know, but when I was a mere ten feet away the sigil-holder turned and cast a silvery gaze towards me. We were done with the posturing, and so I struck. Step forward, feint low to the left and then a spin – its staff my sword and I smiled. It went away quickly, when the staff did not break and its arm did not lower. I was, I could feel, slightly stronger. But not enough to hammer it back, and then the staff *rippled*. My sword blew up, shredding a few fingers with it, and the tip of the staff hit me in the stomach.

I rocked back and it struck upwards smoothly, breaking my chin before whipping back down and going for a thrust into my throat. I spun on myself, feeling the staff pass a hair's breadth from my neck, and formed another blade to swing at its extended shoulder. It spun with me, as if the two of us were dancing, and fluidly stepped away when my strike at reached the apex of its arc. The tip of the staff lightly touched the sword, and just like that it fucking blew up again. The fingers I'd just bloody grew back were shredded again, to my mounting irritation. I made a third blade along with what was clearly more than my third set of fingers of the fight. Irksome as this was, it was likely better than what would happen if Urulan pulled the same trick on my actual body. The drow spoke something in a language other than Crepuscular, sounding amused, but I didn't recognize the language. It sounded close to Reitz, but the vowels were even more of a debacle. Some older form, maybe? Some Secrets floating around the Night were much older than the current Calernia. Most of them, actually.

"Didn't catch that," I said, and attacked.

I didn't start with a feint, this time. It was clearly a better fighter than I was, the only way I'd win was by cheating. I angled my sword for its throat and swung with brute force and speed. It withdrew just out of reach, bending backwards, and then bent forward. One hand came off the staff to tap my side and I had to bite back the scream. It'd found a vein, and was pouring the Night-acid in it. I did the only reasonable thing, and froze my own blood so stop it from spreading. It caught the wrist of my sword hand and forced it to continue the arc as it drew back the staff to better bring it down.

"Mistake," I calmly said.

I turned the wrist it held to mist, and wrenched it out. The wisp of wrist moved under my will, slithering up its nostril and sinking into the brains behind them. All it took after that was a twist of will, and I shredded what lay inside its skull. Mighty Urulan dropped the ground, and I stood panting. I'd

didn't bother recover the flesh I'd turned into mist, making another hand instead. Didn't want the old one back, after where it'd been. My flank still felt like it'd been lit on fire, but I carved out the infection and breathed a sigh of relief. It was only then, covered in blood both my own and that of my enemies, that I realized I'd been naked ever since the acid mist trick. I'd just been too angry to notice, and it wasn't like I felt the cold anyways. I looked down at the drow's corpse and shrugged. Might as well steal its clothes before I cut its head off, then.

Throwing Mighty Urulan's severed head in the middle of its own warriors ought to have a slight effect on enemy morale.

Chapter 66

Tremors

> "It is a small-minded man who needs a reason to create a ritual that would crash the moon into Creation."
>
> Dread Emperor Malignant III, before his death and second reign as Dread Emperor Revenant

The Urulan Sigil broke within an hour of its chief dying at my hands.

It was a valuable lessons as to how I should handle drow in the future. Decapitating a Proceran or Praesi army, for example, wouldn't necessarily take them out of the fight. The Legions, after the Reforms anyway, had been built with the notion in mind that the highest-ranking officers were natural targets for heroes or resistance fighters. Redundancies and a clear order of succession for the chain of command had been set into their framework. Princes of Procer, on the other hand, might be the undisputed rulers of their hosts but they also tended to delegate the practicalities of campaigning to trained career officers. In both cases, putting the head of the army's leader on a pike would be damaging in many ways but not outright scatter that same army. Sigils weren't armies, though, they were tribes kept together only by the strength of the sigil-holder. When I'd tossed Urulan's severed head into the middle of the battle, the glue keeping the sigil together had crumbled. Their kind, when it came down to it, let their actions be dictated by the invisible balance of martial strength. If the attacker was capable of killing the sigil-holder, odds were that the individual who'd done it was capable of wiping out the rest of the sigil on their own. Best to bargain, if possible, or flee if it was not.

Unsurprisingly it was the Mighty that kept fighting the longest. Dzulu could afford surrender more easily, knowing that they weren't worth harvesting to the enemy's upper ranks and that whoever was in charge there would always be a need for warriors to send into the meat grinder. What did they care under which sigil it happened? Drow did not fight for plunder in the way that most tribes and clans would, not exactly. To amount to anything they needed Night, and war was certainly the easiest way to accumulate that – but when there

was a clear winner, doubling down on a losing fight was not to their advantage. Mighty, on the other hand, knew they'd be hunted and harvested after a defeat. Used as spoils instead of coin or food. Surrender might be feasible if assurances were made, but that was not custom. Drow, for obvious reasons, preferred to raise the strength of their own Mighty rather than bring into the fold those defeated. I was part of a broader trend in their ways, one I was only now beginning to really grasp: as far as the drow were concerned, maybe nine tenths of their own kind were essentially irrelevant. Matters of life and death were settled by a handful of Mighty on both sides, with dzulu and nisi serving as tools and ornaments to whoever came out on top.

What that meant, practically speaking, was that the moment Mighty Urulan died this stopped being a battle and started being clean-up. It could still have turned south on us, if we hadn't been careful. The Urulan had outnumbered us three to one in Mighty and if they managed to cull my own numbers the idea of continued resistance might have taken hold. Corpses would have been harvested, fresh demigods raised and sent after our 'champions'. Our saving grace, in this case, was Ivah. My Lord of Silent Steps had no real interest in fighting minions, and had gone after the enemy's Mighty relentlessly. It would have been one thing if those had been allowed to gather together, but instead they'd found themselves ambushed and taken out one by one by a titled drow who was no stranger to these kinds of fights. Archer's sweep on the other side had met with only cursory resistance before she stopped as ordered. When it became clear neither she nor her escorts were inclined to advance any further, the forces sent out to meet her had doubled back to meet my own assault. Too late, however, to turn the tides. Their sigil-holder was already dead.

A few had tried her flank anyway, but after the second time she shot a jawor in the throat the moment it left cover their enthusiasm had mysteriously waned.

I spent the rest of the battle watching over my forces like a hen watching her chicks, not exactly holding their hand but ensuring that if they got in over their heads I could swiftly step on the opposition. To my surprise, even when we began taking sections of the Crossroads holding mostly nisi I never found the need to call my warband to order. My Mighty were oath-bound to decency, but the dzulu were not. Still, it had been made clear to them that wanton slaughter would not be allowed, or rape – though apparently that latter crime was near unheard of among drow, who treated sex as more a chore than a pleasure and rarely bothered unless they were nisi – and in the end they did not test my laws. I wondered if they would have pulled at the leash, had I not personally slain Urulan and its strongest rylleh. My general distaste for what passed as drow nature whispered yes, but I might be doing them injustice. I held no illusions about the moral fibre of a people whose main occupation was murder, but there was something about them that brought old words from Black to mind. *If you have the ability to accomplish something, it is your right to do so.* I hadn't understood back then how deep a look into him that little sentence offered, or

how close to the same Praesi philosophy he disdained it was in practice.

But there was a ring to it, an underlying sense that I saw mirrored in the way drow thought. The pragmatic monsters who'd shaped the woman I was today – and the plural was not a mistake for Malicia had been a teacher too, if not a willing or gentle one – kept to a faith worshipping only ability, the capacity to carry out one's will. That was a face given to their beliefs by the complicated games of the surface, though, where every little act was part of a broader war of growing sophistication. Down here the varnish of civilization had been stripped off, and the face given to that god was rawer: power. Just power. If you were strong enough, your rules were the only rules there were and they would not be questioned or disobeyed unless someone stronger than you contradicted them. I might be ordering them to act in ways that broke their customs, but as long as I remained the larger monster those orders would be observed for that, too, was custom. And perhaps deeper one than the rest.

"So is it me or do you always get all silent and philosophical after a big fight?" Indrani mused.

She swaggered in, her coat flecked with blood and a satisfied smile on her face. For someone who disdained the trappings of civilization, Archer had taken well to battles. Grown to enjoy them more than I'd thought, her sense of what victory being so personal it should not lend itself well to a clash of armies. A reminder, I mused, that people could continue to surprise even when you believed you had the measure of them.

"I never liked this part," I admitted as she came to stand beside me. "The clean-up. When the blades are out and shields collide I can almost feel what the songs sing of, but the aftermath spoils it. The return to the bare realities of what took place."

It'd barely qualified as a skirmish, by the numbers. More soldiers had been involved in the war game that'd won me command of the Fifteenth, and arguably much more complex tactics. How many people had actually fought today? Five hundred, maybe. And of those less than a hundred had actually had an impact on the outcome. There were not even two hundred dead in the aking of the Crossroads, though the way their corpses had been dragged and laid down in rows along the largest avenue made it seem more than it should. Most those bodies were already bereft of Night, their killers have wasted no time claiming their due, but enough remained that the auction to come would be the largest yet. Indrani sighed.

"It does get on my nerves, that the best parts of you are also the most irritating," she said.

I snorted and left it at that, the two of us sharing a rare moment of comfortable silence. She tended to fill those religiously, almost as if she were afraid of the absence of noise, and so I savoured the rare respite.

"Should I ask why you're wearing clothes too large for you?" she finally asked.

"No," I grunted.

"Well, the pants are tight enough they make your arse look *amazing*," Indrani said. "But the whole long sleeves thing makes you look like a Mercantis trader."

"You know what, I'll take it," I said. "Still going to need to change before speaking with whoever comes up, though."

"Talk with Diabolist first, maybe," she said. "It's not like *she's* wearing real clothes, but she is disappointingly not naked all the time."

Thank the Gods for that. Indrani would never get anything done if Akua's admittedly impressive assets were permanently on display.

"I will," I replied. "Not right now, though. She's still taking count of our acquisitions."

"Of course she is," Indrani drawled. "It's almost like she's maneuvering herself into being the obvious pick for who ends up stuck watching over the drow when we get back upstairs."

It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Archer's lack of manners was more choice than inability. In some ways she was as sharp as Hakram when it came to reading social currents.

"She can manoeuvre all she wants, she's not getting the job," I said. "I'm still debating who'll oversee when I'm not around, but she's not in the running."

"Vivienne?" Indrani suggested.

"She doesn't have the right edges," I reluctantly admitted. "They'll challenge her. I'm considering Larat."

"Now there's a real philosophical question," Indrani drawled. "How many treacherous lieutenants it too many treacherous lieutenants?"

"One, but we make do with what we have," I sighed.

"We make do with what we have," Indrani repeated grimly, squinting forward in a poor imitation of a frown.

"I don't sound like that," I protested.

She hunched her shoulders and raised her chin, trying for noble sorrow but mostly looking like she had stomach cramps.

"I beat up empires but I'm real conflicted about it," Indrani declared. "A fairy queen named my crew the Woe because I'm so tragic and misunderstood."

"Screw you," I grinned. "You're part of it too."

"I once finished the last of the stew even if I don't really need to eat, because I'm just the *worst*," Indrani solemnly added.

It surprised a splash of laughter out of me, and once it started it didn't stop. The two of us ended up standing there like fools, sniggering at nothing much at all. It was a released I hadn't known I needed, and I could not help but be grateful for it. I'd thought before that Indrani was most beautiful in fleeting moments, when the part of her that was more glorious alive than anyone I'd ever known came to the surface and it was all you could see. I'd not been wrong, I decided. Strange as it was, she more attractive to me now – laughter glinting in hazelnut eyes, slightly breathless and making sport of all the world – than she would have been half-naked on my bed wearing little but lace.

"I did make a promise, while fighting Urulan," I teased.

"Oh?" she said. "What-"

My hand slipped around her waist, beneath the coat, and she allowed herself to be dipped down. Her eyes wide, I watched her lips part and leaned down to kiss her. She tasted, I thought, like spices – but soon enough all I could think of was the hungry heat of her lips against mine, the way our teeth clicked together awkwardly before she teased me with her tongue. She threaded her fingers into my hair, forcing me closer, and when we finally parted she was flushed and out of breath.

"Gods," she said, "you are so *short*."

Naturally, I dropped her. She fell into a sprawl with a loud yelp, perfectly capable of landing on her feet but never one to allow practicalities to get in the way of theatrics. I wiped my lips, then shrugged.

"There, promise fulfilled," I mused. "Back to work."

"*Really*?" she whined. "You're going to get me all worked up and then just leave?"

"I'm sure you'll get over it," I grinned, and turned my back to her.

She cursed me loudly as I sauntered away, feeling more human than I had in a very long time.

—

I found Diabolist seated like the queen of an industrious grey-skinned hive, drow gravitating to her and Centon for translated instructions before darting away to carry out her bidding. They were getting in the habit of obeying her, I saw. Not the Mighty – they saw her, I suspected, more as an obstacle to climb than a superior – but the nascent pack of dzulu officers and supervisors had grown used to taking her orders. They saw little of me, on a daily basisl. Primly perched on a flat stone, Akua was a vision in her long dress of silver and blue. While high-necked and seemingly conservative, her clothes were cut to be rather flattering to her frame: they suggested rather than revealed, but the suggestion was not mild. Scarlet eyes remained on me as I strolled at her side, plopping myself down next to her. I glanced at Centon.

"Dismissed," I said in Lower Miezan. "All of you."

The nisi, though that status might just be remedied to today, bowed low and repeated the order in Crepuscular. Within five heartbeats we were entirely alone in the avenue.

"Catherine," Diabolist greeted me. "Another victory for your tally."

"It was the opening measure," I replied. "The real pivot comes when the deeper sigils decide on their response."

"There have been scouts," she noted. "No Mighty yet."

"It's coming," I said. "They can't afford an unknown her for long, not when we control the top floor of the Column."

"As you say," Akua murmured, inclining her head. "I had the privilege of witnessing your duel with Mighty Urulan, from a distance."

I hummed.

"And you have thoughts," I said.

So did I, and I was curious to see if they aligned.

"If I may speak frankly?" Diabolist said.

"Never too late to start," I drawled.

"Yes, yes, very clever," she sighed. "I have begun to worry, Catherine. Urulan was perhaps in the twenty strongest drow of Great Lotow, and likely close to the bottom of that division. It fought... better than I expected. You came close to death more than once."

"It was a wakeup call," I softly agreed. "We haven't been taking them seriously enough, have we? Lotow's not one of the big cities when it comes down to it. There's leviathans lurking ahead."

"You have grown used to being able to walk away from wounds that would kill even Named," Akua said. "And so developed what I can only call sloppy habits. I've heard descriptions of your encounters with heroes at the Battle of the Camps, the Saint in particular, and cannot help but think this is a trend and not an instance."

"In that, we are in agreement," I said.

Some of the fights I'd been in, lately... Black would weep to see them. I'd always been more inclined towards brawling than finesse, but I was starting to realize there was a reason my teacher had never seen his relative lack of power compared to his predecessors as a weakness. When you had a good enough hammer, everything started looking like a nail. That was a lot more likely to get you killed than lack of juice. I'd begun to rely on abilities that I should only ever use as a last result, and at some point I was going to run into someone who'd kill me for it.

"You use only the thinnest slice of what Winter is capable of," Diabolist said. "Perhaps exploration in depth is in order."

"You want me to fight like you," I smiled. "Distance, control, never committing."

"Not your usual fare, I know," she said. "But you are no longer the Squire in any significant sense. Your repertoire has expanded."

"Tricks are useful," I admitted. "And I do need to learn how to use the kind of great workings you threw around when riding my mantle. But you're wrong about the rest."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You intend to take the opposite path," Akua said.

"The basics," I mused. "I've been neglecting those, since I took my mantle. Thinking it was all right to get into fights because I'm hard enough to win them. But many of those should never have been fights at all."

"Fight no battle save that which you must, for war is best won away from the field," Diabolist quoted thoughtfully.

"Theodosius?" I asked.

"Terribilis the First," she replied. "You intend... contingencies for the coming meeting with the drow, then."

"They're useful things, contingencies," I muttered, looking up at the bare stone of the cavern ceiling.

It was about time, I decided. The opening was there.

"Marker," I said. "It's time for us to have one of our regular little chats, Akua."

"Is it?" Diabolist said. "I cannot recall-"

She paused. Her face went blank and I smiled ruefully.

"**I compel you to answer my questions and do so truthfully and completely**," I Spoke.

The shade shivered, the order sinking into her.

"We have done this before," Diabolist said.

"We have," I murmured. "Have you walled off any memories or knowledge, or considered doing so?"

"I have not," Akua replied.

"Do you have any hole or holes in your memories?"

"I do not," she said, then cocked her head to the side. "I do not. Oh my, you *have* been thorough."

I had. I'd known from the start that I wouldn't outplay her with words, she'd always been better at that. But I had other ways to even the scales.

"Have you plotted or acted against my interests?" I asked.

"I have not," she replied, sounding amused.

"What are your current short-term and long-term objectives?"

"I seek to prove myself as necessary to the running of your sigil," she said. "And in doing so, remain undeniably useful so long as you have use for the drow. My only long-term objective is survival."

"How do you intend to secure your survival?"

Her lips thinned. She never enjoyed that one.

"I must first learn the exact wording of the oath I believe you gave Thief, to see if it can be escaped through a technicality," Akua said. "I must then prove myself invaluable to your own objectives so that you will allow me to do so. I must be reconciled to Vivienne Dartwick, or she must be removed from the situation. If the wording if without flaw, I will seek to obtain a manner of resurrection that preserves most of what I am."

Nothing new, then. Good.

"Have you manipulated the greater or lesser oaths, or both, so that you can exploit them in any way?" I asked.

"I have not," she said.

The same answer as every time I'd asked the question, but it was worth checking to be sure.

"Do you know why I insisted the oaths be sworn to the Sovereign of Moonless Nights?"

"I do not," she said.

Ah, too broad.

"Do you have theories as to why I did?" I asked.

"I do," Diabolist drawled. "Shall save us the time and elaborate?"

I ignored her. If not prompted, she could lie.

"What are these theories?"

"I believe you intend to divert yourself or your mantle in the future, and so dissociated oath-keeping from your personal identity," she said. "I am not certain if the beneficiary would be an object or an individual, but suspect it will be the former Prince of Nightfall."

Wrong, but she didn't have to know that.

"Is there any other part of my soul you would like me to bare?" Akua asked. "You must have other questions."

I had to keep it short – too long and the risks increased she might notice – and I usually used my last question to make sure she hadn't picked up on anything. I could do that tomorrow, though, at no great loss. And there were some things I'd gown curious about.

"Why do you flirt with me?"

She laughed, full-throated.

"I know you have difficulty remaining emotionally uninvolved when in a sexual relationship, and you have a known weakness for powerful women," she said. "I also believe that contact between us would temporarily allow me to regain full physical senses, which is promising as I find you attractive enough sex would not be unpleasant."

I waited for a moment.

"It also infuriates Thief when she overhears," Akua added reluctantly, forced by the order. "Which I deeply enjoy."

"That might be the most human I've ever seen you act," I said.

She languidly shrugged.

"And now?"

"From and including the word 'marker' I spoke earlier today, you will remember this conversation as idle chatter from the moment this sentence ends," I Spoke.

Her form rippled and a heartbeat passed.

"Amusing as this was, I believe there might be more pressing matters at hand," Diabolist said.

"You're right," I said. "Let's talk contingencies, then."

Still under control for now.

I'd ask again tomorrow.

Chapter 67

Breakthrough

"With great madness comes great possibility."

Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

It took three hours before the first envoy showed up, requesting the name of the sigil that had displaced the Urulan and politely inquiring as to its intentions. Some poor dzulu bastard who'd obviously been sent because it was expendable. It wasn't allowed entrance into the Crossroads, not that it was eager, and I sent Ivah to meet it halfway through one of the bridges instead. Our diplomatic approach, if it could be called that, was rather simple: I wanted a meeting with the nine remaining sigil-holders in Great Lotow. In exchange I would provide information about a great common threat approaching, which Ivah had been instructed to make sound properly dire while remaining light on the details. Given the scope of the dwarven invasion, that was hardly difficult. Decapitating Mighty Urulan had earned me the attention of the city's powerbrokers, but I hadn't made enough of an impression I could simply browbeat them into following me. To get an audience, I needed a gift.

A warning about the dwarves invading ought to do the trick.

The sigil that first approached us was the Slaus, who held the territory directly below the Crossroads. They'd been on decent terms with the Urulan, who usually had higher priorities than raiding their downstairs neighbours, but their envoy made it clear they weren't all that broken up about a replacement having taken up residence. A stronger cork atop the bottle that was Great Lotow was a good thing, in their eyes, since weak Crossroads meant an open door for raids into their own territory. The dzulu provided names along a bare – and probably highly biased – lay of the land to my Lord of Silent Steps even as Akua and I settled the auction. The report I was given afterwards was illuminating, though I'd already known some parts of it from earlier interrogations. Aside from my own sigil, there were nine others in Lotow. The Slaus Sigil, my new 'friends', were fighting to rule the upper levels against the Kanya and Losle. Along with the Urulan, those three sigils had made up the 'weaker'

tribes forced closer to the top of the city and denied the room and resources of better districts.

There were two sigils at the very bottom, the Orelik and the Vasyl, who were the largest of the city and had tacitly been allowed to monopolize the larger farms and lakes so long as they kept trading with the others: the balance there was a delicate one, where other sigils kept them weak enough they couldn't refuse but didn't want to damage them so badly the food would stop coming. That left four sigils to squabble over what had once been the core districts of Great Lotow: Sagas, Nodoi, Soln and Zarkan. From what I understood they'd been at war for the better part of a millennium and played out enough heroic alliances and wicked betrayals to fill a dozen epics, taking and losing territory to each other with every passing year. All four raided other sigils, but usually only to strengthen themselves against their adversaries in the centre. The rest of the city enabled the centuries-old feuds cheerfully, well aware that if one ever became strong enough to devour the others the remainder of Lotow would follow in short order.

Mighty Soln was a name I'd heard before, actually. It was the same drow who'd famously beaten the now-dead Kodrog so bad it had fled into the outer ring, where it'd had the misfortune of running into the dwarves and then myself. Soln was the most promising of the city's Mighty, in my eyes, as it had a reputation for fair dealings. Which mostly meant it formally broke alliances before turning on its former allies, but that was already a cut above the rest. Willingness to make bargains in the first place was what I needed the most.

"I believe a cabal is the way to unite these Mighty under your banner, my queen," Ivah said. "Outright subjugation would be long and costly enterprise, given our current strength."

It had changed again, I thought. There was no trace of the original green or the grown silver in its deep blue eyes, but that was the least of the changes. My Lord of Silent Steps was still tall and blade-thin, but there was a sense of strength to its frame that'd previously been absent. Fae could be skinny as a goblin and still be strong enough to wrestle down an ox, and the bestowal of the title had brought that power to Ivah. That unspoken impression that its body was a disguise, that physical abilities were estranged from its flesh. It walked upon Creation like something not born of it, a transient guest. Its presence had bloomed to my senses, though I'd expected nothing less when I'd offered it the harvesting of Mighty Urulan. I had need of a strong right hand among the drow, and it had proved useful enough to deserve the reward. There were risks to that, but benefits as well.

If it came to a fight again, it'd be my side that fielded Urulan's tricks.

"A cabal," I repeated. "Those are a kind of warrior honour societies, no?"

"It is a nuanced matter," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "In olden days cabals were formed along the twelve purposes and three duties, but this practice has been abandoned by all save the most traditional of my kind. There are cabals that, as you say, are honour and recognition. Only Mighty of renown are invited

to them, and their name swells from the joining. Yet this is no longer the accepted custom."

"Which is?" I prompted.

Ivah hesitated. I'd give it a pass on that, I thought, since I was pretty much asking it to summarize what was beginning to sound like a fairly complex matter simply enough an outsider like me could understand it

"One might say a cabal is a compact of Mighty who share a single desire," the drow finally said. "This desire can be near anything, my queen. The legendary Red Hunt formed when Mighty undertook the annihilation of the Fagran Sigil. The Hour of Twilight was raised when the strongest of Great Albenrak desired the conquest of Great Telarun – and a hundred cabals were born to sow the seeds of the Hour's own destruction. The Old Vigil guards the temples and libraries that once belonged to the Sages, while the Wayfarers still keep the northern Hylian ways open for all who would travel them."

"Mighty but not sigils," I slowly said. "It's on an individual basis. If a sigil-holder's part of a cabal, it doesn't meant the entire sigil is."

Ivah nodded.

"A cabal may hold individuals of many different sigils, some at war with each other, and so long as they act in the fulfilling of the compact they will not turn on each other," the drow said. "It is a separate matter, not to be spoken of."

Which did explain, at least in part, why the Everdark didn't currently consist of half a dozen lesser gods sitting in their own city with the rest of the race long gone. If a sigil started pissing off all its neighbours, half the region's Mighty would form a cabal and put it down together. Gains had to be weighed against the risk of backlash.

"It would not surprise me, for example, if many of Lotow's Mighty were part of a cabal ensuring the farms of the bottom levels remain unspoiled," Ivah elaborated.

"So we make our own cabal," I said. "One that desires evacuation in the face of the dwarves."

"Mighty are proud creatures," Ivah said without a hint of irony. "Stating it differently would be more palatable."

I snorted.

"I suppose calling ourselves the Get Out Ahead Of The Dwarves Cabal wouldn't be all that impressive," I said. "We are, let's say... seeking out Sve Noc for instructions on how to answer the nerezim threat."

"That would be acceptable," Ivah noted. "The Sve speaks only when it wishes, but this is a great crisis. Custom can be bent."

"And you think that'll be good enough an offer they'll take it?" I asked.

"The upper sigils, perhaps," the drow said. "They will know that if a cabal is formed for the defence of Lotow against nerezim encroachment, its first act will be to devour them to strengthen ahead of the battle. I do not believe the others will enter your service."

"And if I make the taking of oaths a requirement to entering the cabal?"

"None will bend," the Lord bluntly said. "Exile would be more acceptable an alternative. Cabals to answer the threat can be formed without us, regardless. We will be seen as useful addition yet no requirement."

Yeah, about what I'd expected. Even with a bearded apocalypse at their doorstep the drow would have issues with my rules. My sigil was just a droplet in the sea of the Everdark, and even in a border city like Great Lotow we weren't the biggest stallion in the pen.

"We'll try anyway," I said.

Ivah's blue eyes watched me closely.

"And if we fail?" the Lord of Silent Steps asked.

"Then I beat them with a stick," I said. "And ask again, much less politely."

—

It was not an auspicious beginning that I couldn't even get every sigil-holder in the city to attend. The Losle refused to show if the Nodoi did, and the Zarkan boldly required both a tithe of dzulu from my ranks and an alliance against the Soln if they were to deign attending. Both the bottom sigils suggested in strong terms that the meeting should be held near their territory, at the lowest level of the Column, which essentially everyone else made clear was unacceptable. I chose the Nodoi over the Losle – the latter were angry they kept being raided by the former, which was reasonable, but the Nodoi were stronger and I needed them more – while Archer returned the Zarkan envoy to its sigil by throwing off the bridge in their territory's direction after it got unruly. Seven out of nine would have to do, and I'd never seriously considered following the suggestion of the bottom sigils. Aside from how unpalatable that'd be to everyone else, it would screw with my contingency. Not make it impossible, no, but it would mean a significant increase in collateral damage if things went south.

Envoys went back and forth for most of a day until the cats were finally herded. It might not have taken as long if the spurned sigils hadn't started ambushing them, but Mighty Soln seized the central levels of the Column for a few hours and guaranteed safe passage. I sent a polite message of thanks, it replied with a hint that the courtesy could be returned more materially and so I sent it back a single word: *nerezim*. I was not above playing favourites in the slightest if it any of them were willing to behave halfway-decently. It was about an hour before the meeting that Ivah came to me with a problem that hadn't thought was one. *If you are to stand among them as sigil-holder, my queen, you must have a sigil*, it informed me. Though some of my drow had taken to calling our band a sigil, it was true I'd never really considered it that. I wasn't a drow myself, and had no intention of remaining their equivalent of a noble when we left the Everdark. But Ivah insisted, saying it would be disrespectful to arrive without the proper apparel and would lower my prestige in the eyes of the others. I gave in, not willing to dig in my heels over something this minor.

There was a slight issue, in the sense that a sigil's, well, sigil was usually the name of the sigil-holder in stylized Crepuscular with the colour of the cloth it was on denoting a creed. Black for the seeking of Night, red for ambition, dif-

ferent shades of blue for those espousing specific virtues and Ivah might have gone on describing for an hour if I hadn't interrupted. The closest equivalent to 'Catherine' in Crepuscular was apparently Katarin, the symbols making it up possible to accentuate to mean either 'elegant snake' or 'delicate dark pearl'. I was rather glad Archer wasn't around to hear the second one, though Akua got rather smirky regardless. 'Foundling' had no real equivalent, though after conversing for a while like two deaf people shouting across the language divide I got the sounds and meaning of it in Lower Miezan understood. *Losara*, Ivah finally said. The characters of it meaning 'lost and found', and when drawn on the dirt resembling a tree with twin incomplete circles under the branches. Painted in silver over purple cloth, which symbolized seeking a higher purpose.

The irony amused me. Upwards was where I meant for them to go, after all.

A nisi with some aptitude for painting that hadn't been slain for the talent was rustled up and a sigil produced, barely dry by the time I set out alone. I had need of Diabolist and Archer elsewhere, and given the nature of my plans bringing a retinue would be a waste. Besides, the agreement was for a meeting between only myself and the sigil-holders. A solid third of the debate through envoys had been settling on a language for the conversation, which had ended up being Chantant. It got stuck in my throat that odds were good people had been killed so all the sigil-holders would be fluent in the Proceran tongue when they arrived, but Indrani's words had stayed with me. I'd not come here to save the drow from themselves. I wasn't sure if I could. *Or even if I should.* I came to the Mighty of Great Lotow without my cloak, draped instead in the cloth of my sigil over my clothes. The glamour I wore had been anchored in a stone I'd made myself swallow, carefully crafted over hours to be flawless. There was no room for mistakes today.

The meeting was to be held in the Column, my first venture into the dead heart of this ruined city. The structure itself was a broad pentagon, every side measuring exactly sixty-five feet and seven inches. Given the Column's ridiculous height – it had to make up most of a mile – simply stacking stones wouldn't have been enough for it to hold up. The ancient drow hadn't done that, anyway: masonry was a different business when you lived underground. The Column itself was the remains of what had once been solid ground before a pit was excavated around it, further reinforced by five spines of some red metal going all the way up and a plethora of bridges linking it to the surrounding districts. I'd actually thought the metal was just rust steel, when I first took a look at it, but it was oily to the touch and perfectly preserved. If not for my suspicions it was the main thing holding up the structure, I would have ripped out a few chunks to bring back home to Callow: I'd never seen an alloy like it, and if it could survive a few centuries without regular touch-ups it was heads and shoulders above anything my people had ever used.

The inside was surprisingly elaborate. Most everything that could be pried or hammered off had been, including entire spans of mosaics and anything

even remotely shiny but every single floor was a book in Crepuscular, beautiful curved characters spreading out in rows and swirls. Historical chronicles and stories, songs and poems and every written thing that made up the lifeblood of a culture. It was a stark contrast to the stumps left behind by stolen statues, the dusty holes of ripped out mosaics and the spider webs woven into the complicated arrays of dead magelights and absent mirrors that must have once cast light all over the Column floors. The structure had not been the administrative centre of Great Lotow, or its religious one – temples and palaces were in the middle districts – but it had been the heart of the old city. I walked through empty marketplaces and riots of now-dry fountains, gardens of dust and the wrecked stands of what must have once been a public playhouse. It was the grave of an ancient people, still haunted by the last remnants of it. I allowed myself awe, but not too much. Past glories were a little thing in the face of breathing dangers.

Having Masego along for the calculations would have been preferable, but admittedly Diabolist was no slouch when it came to numbers. She'd counted the bridges, figured out the weight and given me the correct floor. I hoped, anyway. There would be no second chance if she was wrong. Ten floors deep, that was the sweet spot, but I'd had to compromise and go to the eleventh. Most levels of the Column had multiple access points aside from the two sets of spiraling stairs every single one boasted, but the eleventh floor had once served as a court where lesser offences were settled. There were no bridges leading to it, and the heart of the floor was a large courtroom whose only point of entrance and exit was a set of massive stone doors. Given the temptation of ambushing this large a concentration of Mighty in one place, this floor had been judged the most fitting place for a meeting. Time was fluid in the Everdark, not in the way that it was in Arcadia but because there were so few devices that measured it. No bells, down here, and so I was not overly surprised I'd been the last to arrive. I'd taken my time to ensure as much, after all.

The doors were slightly ajar, just enough a single person could pass through, and seven Mighty seated on high thrones beyond them. For all that power swam around them like currents, I could not help but think they looked like children. There were nineteen seats set against the walls, and the sight of the sigil-holder failing to claim even half of them made it seem like they were just kids wearing the regalia of adults. Playacting at empire in a pile of ruins. None rose when I entered, remaining seated on the thrones of stones where they had draped their sigil's banner. Without a word I leaned forward and clasped the red metal rings set into the stone doors, closing them shut behind me with a clap as my bones creaked under the weight. Seven pairs of eyes studied me in silence as I wiped my now dust-coated hands on my pants and strolled forward. I didn't overthinking my sitting position, simply claiming the throne to the left of the doors and putting my banner over it.

"Losara," one of the Mighty said. "And so we finally have a name."

The Chantant it had spoken in was a strange mixture of Crepuscular pro-

nunciation and an ancient Alamans way of speaking, but still perfectly understandable for all that. I eyed the banner behind the speaker, having memorized the names going with the symbols. Orelik, I thought, recognizing the swirly fish-like pattern. One of the two bottom sigils, those that held the farms. It was the first fat drow I'd ever seen and the sight was jarring. The loose hide tunic failed to hide the folds of grey skin, though its pure silver eyes served as reminder that fat or not it was accomplished in the art of killing.

"*Mighty* Losara, you bloated old slug," another drow replied. "Urulan would speak to that truth, if it still spoke."

Its symbol looked like eyes over three fangs: Slaus, my downstairs neighbours. That sigil had the most skin in this game, as they were both sharing a border with me and the next in line if an outside threat came muscling in. I settled into my throne, comfortable allowing the byplay to go on without me. Which it did, hissed sentences in Crepuscular starting to go back and forth as the Mighty began what sounded like an old and bitter argument. They were interrupted by the sound of stone shattering. The Mighty who'd struck its throne and powdered a chunk of it rose to its feet, face twisted in irritation. The sigil behind it was one I easily identified, as I'd paid particular attention to it: a ring of swords, with an open mouth in the centre.

"You spend the time of your betters frivolously," Mighty Soln said. "Be *silent*."

Both the other drow looked furious, but they did not argue. I cleared my throat.

"If we're quite done," I said, eyebrow rising, and none gainsaid me. "You came here because I promised information. As it pertains to the conversation I wish to have afterwards, I'll begin by laying it out in full."

Silver eyes all turned to me, and I shifted in my throne. The fucking thing had been carved for someone Hakram's height, not mine, and so my legs were dangling off of it like I was a kid in her father's seat. It was adding insult to injury that I knew for a fact I fit in dwarven seats just fine.

"As of two months ago," I said, "the nerezim have begun an invasion of the Everdark."

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," I said. "I did not misspeak. This is not an expedition, it is an *invasion*. At least a hundred thousand soldiers came through the Gloom, their vanguard led by a Named. They bring with them civilians because they intend to stay. Even as we speak most of the outer ring has fallen into their hands. They aim for nothing less than the extermination of your kind."

One of the Mighty scoffed. It sigil looked like a wall broken through. *Sagas*, I thought, one of the strong sigils in the centre.

"Burning words," Mighty Sagas said. "Yet what proof do you bring?"

"I have witnesses, if my word is not sufficient," I said. "They saw the vanguard with their own eyes. Saw it slaughter an entire sigil of the outer ring."

"I doubt not the word," Mighty Orelik said. "It has been delivered. You have done service, human, and may now leave."

"That won't be happening," I mildly said.

"Do you think aping our ways gives you seat here?" the drow hissed. "You are interloper, not guest. Know your-"

"Be silent, Orelik," Mighty Soln said softly. "If I must ask you a third time, there will not be a fourth."

The first Mighty opened its mouth, but Soln rose from its seat and the lips closed. I nodded in appreciation, though got only indifference in response.

"I came here today to propose the founding of a cabal," I said. "Not to defend Great Lotow, for it is already lost. It was the moment the nerezim crossed the Gloom in force. But to seek out Sve Noc and ask instruction."

One of the Mighty snorted. Nodoi, I saw, the last of the central sigils in attendance. I needed those the most, if I was to make any progress at all.

"The Sve speaks when it wishes," Mighty Nodoi said. "That is custom. To *request* words is to beg for a curse."

Mighty Slaus sneered.

"Are we inner ring darkskins, to prattle of tradition?" it replied. "Mighty Losara speaks sense. Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures."

I would have been more moved by the support if I hadn't known it sprang from the fact that the Slaus would be on the chopping block the moment the central sigils decided to band together to defend the city. It was less belief in my solution that bade it to speak than the urge of self-preservation.

"Do we know when the nerezim will strike?" one of the Mighty said, staring at me.

Vasyl, the symbol said. The other bottom sigil, and noticeably less hostile than the Orelik so far.

"At least two weeks," I said. "Perhaps more, if they spread their forces to completely clear out the outer rings."

"Then this is no time for quibbling," Mighty Vasyl grimly said. "Defences must be seen to, or the city abandoned. There is no middle path."

"I'll be frank," I said. "You can't hold Lotow. They'll bring down the city on your heads and drown the districts in molten stone without ever engaging. They have the engines for it. This is not a war like those you know. They will not harvest or take prisoners: their intent is to claim the Everdark without any of you in it."

"You know nothing, child," Mighty Orelik sneered. "We have fought wars, turned back the Hylian Dogs when they tested our borders. You-"

"- have commanded armies larger in number than this entire city," I flatly replied. "I've slain heroes and tricked fae, walked the streets of Keter as a guest and pried life out of the hands of the Hashmallim. You're just a rat in a hole, Orelik, and if you try my patience once more I swear on all the Gods I will feed you your own fucking limbs."

It flinched, and murmurs spread across the room. They might not know much about fae or heroes, down here, but the mention of the Dead King's capital had made an impact. *Him* they remembered.

"It is said you make even Mighty take oaths," Mighty Soln said, voice cutting through the whispers.

"I have rules," I said. "They bring power as well as bindings. Many have thought this a worthy trade."

"And these rules," Soln said. "Will you seek to impose them on any that join this nameless cabal of yours?"

I rose to my feet, hand going through through my clothes and taking out a parchment scroll. I tossed it at the Mighty Soln, who easily snatched it out of the air.

"I will," I said. "These are the oaths, written in Crepuscular, though they will have to be sworn in my own native tongue."

The drow unfolded it, silver eyes studying the contents, and didn't even get halfway through before it snorted and tossed the scroll at Mighty Vasyl.

"This is subjugation, not alliance," Mighty Soln said

"They are standards of behaviour," I replied calmly, "enforced by my mantle."

That did nothing to move it, so I moved on to the larger audience when I kept speaking.

"Are none of you tempted by the thought of an alliance that you *know* will hold?" I said. "That will lead to no betrayal, for going back on the oaths means death. How much could you actually accomplish, if you were not always watching your back for knives?"

"A cabal is a worthy idea," Mighty Soln said. "Yet this is not a cabal, Losara. It is... *queenship*, your kind call it."

"It would make me warlord," I said. "Until the war is over. An extraordinary measure for an extraordinary crisis."

Mighty Vasyl had passed the scroll to Mighty Nodoi, who outright laughed.

"You give terms like a victor," it said. "You are not. This is overreach. To obey your orders without fail? Madness. *Arrogant* madness."

"You've overplayed your strength, child," Mighty Orelik said.

This time no one chided it.

"I'm sad to hear you believe that," I said. "Should I consider this to be a refusal for all of you?"

"Obedience is not our way," Mighty Slaus said. "The terms must be changed."

Mighty Soln laughed.

"Look into its eyes, Slaus," it said. "Do you see compromise there? No, this was not request. It was an order."

Slowly, I sat back down on my throne.

"Is there nothing," I asked, "that I can do to change your minds?"

"If you seek the terms of a victor," Mighty Soln said, "*prove yourself one*."

The challenge rang loud and clear in the room. There was only agreement on the faces of the others, and so I tugged at the chains that bound Akua to me. Our signal.

"I considered that," I admitted. "But what would be the point? I've no need of corpses and chaos. It's you I want. The whole lot of you."

The Column shivered under our feet and every single Mighty had left their throne within a heartbeat.

"Ambush," Mighty Orelik said. "Your last mistake, human."

"I'm not going to fight you," I calmly said. "That would be wasteful, and I was taught better than that. This is a... counterargument."

The sound of stone shattering sounded in the distance, and half the Mighty began boiling with Night. It was pointless. The moment the shiver had been felt the gate had opened. Akua and I were not without cleverness, and so we'd planned to have it unfold right under the ceiling of the floor below. Unfelt until it cut through the walls, and by then it'd be too late. The bridges had snapped under the weight, and the Mighty that would have fought me found their footing failing as we began to impossibly fall. The conclusion was appropriately impressive: our chunk of the Column hit the ground with a massive impact, and the gate sliced right under the ceiling above us as it closed. I fell from my throne, ankle bone snapping from the bad angle, but forced myself to rise.

Midday sun shone down on us, bring a cold breeze with it.

"What have you done?" Mighty Nodoi howled.

"Welcome," I calmly said, "to Arcadia."

"This is not the Everdark," Mighty Soln said, tone confounded.

"No," I smiled. "And if you ever want to return there, well, you have the scroll. All it'll take is a few oaths."

"You will not survive this," Mighty Orelik screamed.

"I will return tomorrow," I said, ignoring it, "to see if any of you have reconsidered. Try not to die."

Without bothering with goodbyes, I abandoned the glamoured drow corpse I'd been controlling and left them to stand alone in the outskirts of Winter.

Interlude: Heretics

> "It is common practice among the lower classes of Praes, who lack surnames, to name their children after themselves in the hopes of confounding any devils coming to collect on debts."
>
> Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

Masego had not missed court.

At least this was not Ater, where a formal session would be held in the Tower with corresponding pageantry, but Thalassina was wealthy enough its ruler was near as indulgent. The floating fountains and illusory interior garden were proof enough of that. High Lord Idriss Kebdana was, he'd been told, an old ally of the Empress. Two years ago that would have made him Masego's ally as well, but things had since changed. Catherine and Malicia were enemies now, and he'd already had to give thought as to how he would attack the Tower's vicious set of protections when that enmity finally led to blows. He'd considered killing High Lord Idriss, since he was already here anyway, but he *was* a guest. It was apparently very different to kill someone on the battlefield compared to killing them in their bed – which was irksome since practically speaking the end result was the same – so he'd eventually decided against it. Still, he'd made a note of the weaknesses in the city's wards. If the Army of Callow ever had to assault Thalassina, he was confident he could collapse the central array with the right ritual.

"A glass, Lord Hierophant?"

His eyes moved under the cloth to study the pair who'd approached him. Twins. Soninke, or close enough: native Thalassinians tended to be mixed blood, taking in appearance after the last infusion from either side. The man had the Gift, and heavily enchanted robes. An utter waste, he thought with disdain as he took them in. Silk might be costly and take well to sorcery, but it also dispersed it at an unusually high rate. The Yan Tei supposedly had their ways around that, but secrets from across the Tyrian Sea were not easily obtained. Those robes would require regular maintenance just to keep up... warmth, shifting patterns of gold and a lesser illusion anchored in the man's face? What a waste of the art. Three different workings in this difficult a material: they were throwing away a skilled mage's time just by owning it.

The woman of the pair was offering him a delicate transparent glass filled with wine. His eyes narrowed in on it, finding no poison within. Unusual. They put poison in everything at events like this.

"That won't be necessary," Masego replied.

He belatedly remembered to add a slight inclination of the head as thanks, as was polite.

"I would have thought you eager to taste a proper Wasteland vintage, after your years abroad," the man said with a friendly smile.

"I usually can't tell where wine is from," he admitted. "Not without alchemical tools."

They both laughed, which surprised him. Had someone told a joke? He should pay closer attention to the conversation then. The woman laid a hand on her brother's arm and leaned forward as she laughed, the elaborate straps of her dress shifting. It was a strange apparel, he thought. Thalassina was known for its seaside breeze, would she not get cold walking outside attired in this way? Maybe it was a dress meant purely for receptions like these.

"Still, it must be pleasing to have returned home," the woman said. "The provinces are not known for their... comforts."

She was leaning forward again. Must have a bad back.

"I usually sleep in the Observatory," Masego noted. "So I wouldn't know."

"Ah, the famous Observatory. I have heard much of it, lately," the man smiled. "Your own work, it is not? Would it be indiscreet to ask how it functions?"

The blind man cocked his head to the side.

"Have you read Serebano's ten volumes on scrying?" he asked.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"I have not," the man said.

"Then there would be no point in telling you," Masego replied. "You lack the necessary grounding to understand the basic underlying tenets."

The man's smile grew stiff, though his twin seemed amused.

"Then I will obtain copies, my lord, and perhaps we can pursue that discussion at a later date," the other mage said.

"If you'd like," Masego said. "Although I've been told I should kill anyone who tries to figure it out without permission, so that seems counter-productive of you."

"Is that so?" the male twin blandly said.

His face had gone blank. *Ah, I offended him*, the mage realized. It must have been that he'd made it clear the man was ignorant. His friends kept telling him it was impolite to do that, though they might as well ask him to stop remarking that the sea was wet. Ignorance was everywhere.

"I am told you've never visited Thalassina properly," the female twin said.

Masego wondered if it was too late to ask for their names. It probably was. Father had provided him a list with names and descriptions, but he'd needed something to wipe an acid stain and he hadn't felt like getting up to

fetch a cloth. That might have been a tactical mistake of sorts, he reluctantly conceded. In his experience, if you asked people their name after conversing with them for more than four sentences they tended to get angry.

"I am uncertain what you mean by properly," he said. "But I have only ever seen a few streets and parts of this palace."

"There is much I could show you, then," she replied smilingly. "It would be a grave sin if I never offered to escort you to the seastone walls or the corals."

He was uncertain what religion had to do with sightseeing, but Thalassinians *were* known for their strange practices.

"If my work allows," he said.

By reputation, the corals were rather beautiful. Also filled with old wards and traps for any seeking invasion through the sea, which to be frank interested him rather more.

"My sisters knows the city well as any native," the other twin said encouragingly. "And I've no doubt the company of your own kind will be a balm after your time amongst the savages."

"Most legionaries are actually well-behaved," Masego noted. "And I spent little time with them regardless."

They laughed again, to his growing confusion. He went over the spoken words carefully. His own kind? He'd thought they meant humans, which was rather odd since as far as he knew the Army of Callow was human in majority. Assuming they were not idiots, which he almost never did in situations such as these, they might have meant 'his kind' as Praesi instead. Oh. Was he supposed to be feeling patriotic since the Empire was at war? But then he was technically at war with it, since his friends were, so the logic was not sound. Baffling.

"You meant Callowans," he tried.

"I suppose some are barely civilized," the male twin mused. "They did spend a few decades under our rule, after all. And they are now led by the Carrion's Lord castoff, no doubt thanking all their Gods for her Praesi education."

"I was not aware my uncle had cast off anything," Masego noted. "Except scruples, but he's always insisted he was born without those."

Which had led to a thoroughly wasted evening when he'd been nine and trying to find those in his anatomy charts, worried Uncle Amadeus was missing an organ. The woman smiled over the rim of her cup.

"There is no need to be coy, my lord," she said. "We have kin in the capital. The breach between the two is common knowledge in the right circles."

Who had Uncle Amadeus been arguing with recently? The Empress, he remembered, but that hardly fit the rest of the conversation. Did they mean Catherine?

"It must have been tedious to humour the fools," the man drawled. "Yet you did benefit: an unprecedented Name. Your foresight is to be praised."

Oh, they'd been insulting his friends the whole time. Maybe. He should check to be certain, Hakram had noted it was important.

"By the fools, you mean the Woe," he asked.

"What greater fools are there?" the woman laughed.

So now the list. They were nobles, since no one else would be allowed here. They weren't visibly being forced to speak to him. There'd be no collateral damage to innocents. Was it legal? Probably. Callow had some kind of treason law about insulting the queen, didn't it? It counted.

"Right," Hierophant smiled, and raised his hand. "*Boil*."

Casting without proper incantation had become much easier since his transition, save when he was molding miracles. As a rule Trismegistan sorcery put greater emphasis on precise manipulation of magical energies than the use of mediums like incantations and runes – they were a crutch to visualize and measure, not a requirement – but that same precision made it difficult to actually dispense with those mediums. The acceptable margin of error before collapse in a Trismegistan spell formula was barely a tenth of what it would be in a Petronian equivalent or, Gods forbid, a *Jaquinite* one. As a result Trismegistan sorcery usually produced superior results for inferior costs while serving the same purpose, but also required greater skill and longer practice from of the mage using it. The portion of practitioners that could transcend those limitations was small, and even among those such transcendence was usually reserved for a few especially well-studied formulas. It was possible to lower the bar so badly any blunderer could tinker with the spell, of course, as the Legions had done with their own arcane roster. But only at the expense of every single boon save flexibility.

Fortunately, Masego's sensitivity to the forces he manipulated through his will had greatly increased since transition. He'd initially been disinclined to rely on anything as fallible as *senses* when using magic, but he'd overcome that reluctance after proving he could reproduce that sensitivity through adjusted measuring tools. Indeed, he'd since come to theorize that aside from magical capacity – one's inborn talent to use sorcery – there might be a second, more discreet aspect to the Gift. Sensitivity to those same energies, which he'd ventured on parchment might be what distinguished mages capable of using High Arcana from those who could not even after a lifetime of dedicated study. It might even finally solve the mystery of why the Taghreb produced fewer mages than Soninke stock but a proportionally higher amount of mages capable of using the higher mysteries. Many Taghreb lines had twined with creatures, after all, wich were said to have a natural grasp of magic humans did not. The paired screams of the twins as their blood boiled in their veins and began to waft out through their eyes and nostrils shook him out of his thoughts. Ah, yes, that was still happening.

The spell had been crude, its formula still fresh and untested, but being able to affect blood without a sympathetic link or a ritual whose sheer power would make the matter irrelevant was excitingly new grounds for him. He paid close attention to the rate at which their blood evaporated, committing the numbers to memory, and was rather irked when they both only died after

ten heartbeats. Much too long, it meant part of the heat was being dispersed into the broader body. He'd have to scrap the entire containment vector, and since that was tied into almost every part of the formula that effectively meant scrapping the entire spell and starting from scratch.

"Masego."

Papa's tone was chiding, and there had been a time where that would have given Hierophant pause. Before Keter. Before he'd seen Tikoloshe walk the grounds of what had become the single most significant magical phenomenon in Calernian history without speaking a single word of it to his son. Much had been cast into doubt by that revelation. If Papa had been human there might have been uncertainty about his motivations, but unlike humans devils were... direct. Unequivocal in what drove them. There were only two reasons that Tikoloshe would have failed to fulfill Masego's desire when he so easily could, and both were ugly things. *So which are you, father – a stranger or a slave?* Either was betrayal, if owned by different pair of hands.

"Father," he simply replied.

"That was unwise," Tikoloshe said, eyeing the corpses.

Masego frowned.

"It would have been better to test the spell on animals beforehand," he conceded. "But pigs are expensive and the physiological differences really are rather minor."

Whispers spread across the hall in the wake of his words. No doubt they were agreeing with him. Apes were even better for experimentation, admittedly, but those could only be obtained from across the Tyrian Sea and they were *ridiculously* costly to import. Even the small ones that didn't know any tricks. He'd asked around. Well, asked Vivienne to, which was basically the same thing. Papa sighed. More than a few nobles flushed at the sight.

"That is not what I meant," he said. "You should apologize to High Lord Idriss for disrupting his reception."

Masego's brow rose. Wasn't it already enough that he hadn't killed the man? He'd been very courteous so far.

"Will he apologize for them insulting my friends?" he asked peevishly.

"He is not responsible for their words," Tikoloshe said.

"Then it has nothing to do with him" Masego said.

"Mas-"

"*Enough*," Hierophant hissed. "Father asked for my help and so I came, but my patience is running thin. I agreed to lend my time, not *waste* it. There is work to do, and none of it takes place here."

He could be at the Obervatory right now, plumbing the depths of a hundred Hells. He could be with Catherine, taking apart drow sorcery and learning from ancient secrets. He could be picking at the minds of the Wild Hunt to understand what set them apart from the other fae but no, instead he was at court, talking with blind children who – Masego took a deep breath. He would not get angry. Not over this, when the true source of his anger was other. He

would be fair, and hold only the responsible to account. They'd shown him. It was *better* when the world worked that way. And when it didn't? You just had to make it.

"Enjoy court, Father," he said through gritted teeth. "I am done with it."

—

Wekesa watch his son stride away in a swirl of dark robes, leaving silence behind him. A few heartbeats and then whispers bloomed, even as servants took away the corpses of the Serali twins. Their father was stuck halfway between terrified and furious, his little gamble to curry favour having proved rather costly. But this was court, in the end, and so the conversations moved on. Lord Hajal Serali's blunder would be the talk of the city for a few weeks and that would be the end of it. The man was not so influential as to risk taking revenge on a Named, not unless Alaya tacitly allowed it. Which she would not. Warlock had set this as a condition with his old friend before sending for Masego. So long as certain boundaries were observed, the Eyes would disappear anyone even considering raising a hand at his son. Tikoloshe returned to his side, and decades of marriage told him his husband was feeling rather irritated even if his face betrayed none of it. The two of them were given a wide berth after they reunited, the implicit courtesy nothing less than his due. He and his son were the only thing that stood between Thalassina and a sack, after all. Idriss might get snippy about the dead bodies, but he would not forget that.

Wekesa was not above simply leaving if he felt like it, and had made that much abundantly clear.

He was here on Alaya's behalf, not the High Lord's, and she knew better than to ask to tedious a favour of him. Wekesa had not thrown away his hours teaching imbeciles when Amadeus had requested it, and he would not do the same fighting this chore of war if he had to watch for knives aimed at his family's back. Not even for a single battle, however interesting in nature. If Procer and its crusading fellow insisted on testing the Wasteland he'd discipline them appropriately, but what did he care if Nok and Thalassina burned? He had no laboratories or correspondents in either: there was nothing to defend. If Kahtan or Okoro were on the line it would be a different story, but they were too far inland to be threatened by Ashuran raids. Tikoloshe came to stand by his side, almost close enough to touch, and Wekesa idly brushed his fingers against the rune-carved jewels on his belt. The contamination ward bubbled out a heartbeat later.

"He used to be such an obedient child," his husband mourned.

"He's an adult now," Wekesa said. "With the opinions of one. He won't always agree with us. He's no longer the little boy that used to chase the hem of our robes."

The incubus made a moue. It was a wonder, Warlock thought, that even after all these years the sight of that could cause a low stir of desire in his belly. He'd never taken another lover after wedding his husband – how could

any mortal man be half as good in bed as a creature born of desire itself? – and still it amazed him he'd never felt the need to seek a partner outside their marriage. It wasn't like Tikoloshe would have minded, though he'd certainly gotten more possessive over the years. Love, Wekesa thought, was a strange thing. For what else could it be he felt, when other desires failed to move him?

"In public, 'Kesa?" Tikoloshe said, sounding flattered.

"It's nothing they've not speculated about," he replied, sliding a hand around his husband's firm waist and bringing him close for a kiss.

There was little chaste about it, but they did not linger.

"You're attempting to distract me," Tikoloshe sighed. "It won't work. This is more than growing up, Wekesa. He is angry with us. Which one I cannot tell, but-"

"I know," Warlock admitted. "And while I mislike Foundling, she has done wonders to keep him even-keeled. He would not act so sullen without a reason."

Amadeus' apprentice might be a little twerp as arrogant as she was ignorant, but she'd done right by his son. He'd seriously considered asking Alaya to keep her alive just for how she benefited Masego, but the situation was too far gone. It'd become a mess between her and Amadeus, and while those were rare they also tended to get exceedingly nasty. *He should have adopted some orphan years ago and settled the paternal urge*, Wekesa thought. More than once he'd hinted fatherhood might do his friend some good. He and Alaya acted like they were married half the time, a shared child would only have served to channel that tension more productively.

"Then he's learned something that angered him," Tikoloshe said. "While he was abroad."

And there was the trouble, for while Wekesa knew neither of them had been perfect fathers he was genuinely surprise anything he'd done would wound his son this way. He should have spent more time with Masego when he was younger, instead of studying. That was one of his great regrets, for he'd not truly understood back then that those days would never come again. All those he cared about, save for his husband, were Named. He'd gotten in the habit of treating long partings as being of little import. Yet where would his son have learned to resent this? None of the Woe were close to their parents according to the reports, save for the Thief, and her father hadn't even known she was moonlighting as an apprentice to a member of the Guild of Thieves. Trust and closeness could be different matters, true, but it was still baffling.

"I cannot think of what would have led to this," Warlock admitted.

"He's been to Keter," Tikoloshe murmured.

"That matter is long buried," Wekesa frowned.

"The Dead King-"

"Would not deign to indulge in games with a mortal mage, however talented," Warlock flatly stated.

"Then it might have been the journey," his husband replied.

Wekesa did not contradict him. The reflection of Keter in Arcadia must be highly perilous, but he knew little of it. Hye had passed through there once, but getting anything useful out of her was near impossible. It wasn't that she lied. That would have been of some use, as even boasts and exaggerations would hold a kernel of truth. No, it was the opposite: she was concise to the point of uselessness. *I walked through Arcadia and then cut my way out and then I beat up dead people all the way to Hell.* That was the whole sum of how she'd described her experience assaulting Keter through the realm of the fae, to Warlock's despair. Trying to tease more information out of her inevitably ran into the wall of Ranger genuinely believing she'd given him all she needed to and getting irritated if he implied otherwise.

"Perhaps a conversation is in order," Wekesa finally said.

"Perhaps," his husband gently mocked.

He grimaced. It would be a delicate matter to approach, even more so if it proved to be a correct guess. Warlock was not unaware that decades of being able to dictate on what terms he interacted with almost everyone else had atrophied some his former social finesse. On the other side of the room, Lady Gharim dropped to the floor screaming and clawing at her face. Her veins had turned dark, thick with rot. Sloppy spellwork.

"People," the Warlock said loudly enough his voice could be heard by all attendees, "should be aware of their own limitations."

His gaze lingered on the dead woman, who might still be alive if she hadn't tried her hand at an eavesdropping spell. Contamination wards were not forgiving.

"I believe we will take our leave, High Lord Idriss," Tikoloshe smiled. "And let that particular reminder linger in our absence."

The hall was silent, at least for now. Whispers would resume as soon as they left.

It was not the first death of the night, and it would not be the last.

Interlude: Dreadful

> "And so Sinistra said: 'What we cannot grow we will take by dread, and damnation on all who deny this.'"
>
> Extract from the Scroll of Misfortunes, thirteenth of the Secret Histories of Praes

The Windless Salon was an indulgence.

Not hers, originally, but that of Dread Emperor Sorcerous. The infamous warlock-emperor had been fond of ambitious experiments demonstrating the superiority of Praesi sorcery over all others. His in particular, and he'd never been shy about denting the treasury for his latest fancy. The Salon was one of his earlier projects: an entire floor of the Tower, well above the clouds, made into a single room. The stones of the walls and ceiling were enchanted to make it seem as if it were entirely outdoors, revealing a staggeringly beautiful view in every direction. Nefarious had despised it, for he'd spent the better part of a decade trying to puzzle out its secrets with only failures to show for it. In truth, few save for Sorcerous himself had ever used the Windless Salon. Alaya and her predecessors misliked allowing the lords and ladies of Praes access this far up the Tower, and there was no lack of other wonders within the walls to strike a particular tone when receiving guests. The Empress had, instead, turned Sorcerous' costly vanity into an office of sorts.

The seats and sofas had been removed, saved for her own luxurious cushioned armchair, and the ornate banquet tables had been replaced by two bureaus and a writing desk. Access here was restricted to those she'd given token to, and with good reason. The transparent walls of the Windless Salon had been adorned with a maze of secrets and faces. Painted mosaics representing every Praesi noble of import hung over apparent air, tiles written over in chalk noting their latest schemes and objectives and alliances. Lines had been drawn to connect conspirators and foes, weaving a tapestry of treacheries and interests that spanned the whole of her empire. It was not all exact, of course. Believing this to be untouchable sanctum merely because she had the minds of everyone with access searched at random intervals would have been arrogance. The tiles were incomplete, sometimes incorrect information added to fool a would-be spy. The only complete and truthful version was in Alaya's own mind.

Years of practice meant she had only to close her eyes to see the whole of it, but there was something oddly soothing about seeing the Wasteland's plotting laid bare against the backdrop of Ater's sky. In the last few years, a fresh section had been birthed. A small cluster of names under a chalk-drawn crown. Such a small representation for a handful of people who'd shaken the foundations of Calernia. A half-full cup of wine in hand, Dread Empress Malicia allowed her gaze to linger on the foremost individuals of the Kingdom of Callow. Some names were followed by only sparse writing. Hakram of the Howling Wolves, the Adjutant, remained opaque in intent and motivation despite her best efforts. It was tempting to study the Woe through the lens of what she knew the Calamities to be, but it would be an overly simplistic view. Oh, most of them had ties to the old guard: Masego was Wekesa's own son, the Archer had been the favourite pupil of that rabid dog in Refuge and Catherine had been the only apprentice Amadeus ever took. The Adjutant himself was often dismissed as Captain's legacy in green, which had always amused Malicia greatly.

The boy had more in common with Scribe than he'd ever had with still-mourned Sabah, and even that was overly simplified. His Name, as far as she could tell, had been shaped since inception to serve as shield and empowerment to Catherine Foundling's own role. The Woe were not their predecessors, and that was a shame: Alaya had spent decades learning how best to work with and around the Calamities. Dealing with a younger and cruder version of them would have been mercifully easy. No, instead she'd been forced to learn to navigate an entirely different river of desires and drives. Changeable things, these, especially in individuals so young. The girl who was now called the Black Queen had little in common with the child who'd chased Black's shadow as his Squire. Still, she'd begun to understand the lay of them. Where pressure could be applied for the correct effect. Vivienne Dartwick was the weakest link. Archer had been the obvious guess, but much like Hye the girl was simply too apathetic to be influenced. It was hard to leverage someone who cared about nothing save a few earthly pleasures that essentially any major city on the surface of Calernia could provide.

Thief, however? She was a Callowan nationalist, the kind that kingdom bred by the thousands. That was an old foe to Praesi, one made almost predictable – though no less dangerous for it. People like Vivienne Dartwick had broken Wasteland invasions for a millennium and a half with only two major failures to show for their toil. Patriotism was a set of blinders, Malicia would not speak otherwise, but however narrow the perspective it had proven exceedingly skilled at frustrating Praesi efforts. Fortunately, central tenets of it ran contrary to the kind of nation Catherine was trying to build. The Black Queen had failed to realize, she often thought, how deeply she'd taken after Praesi culture. Callowans tended to think of their own ethnic group and their nation at the same thing, unlike Praesi. The Dread Empire had, since the Declaration, been made up of disparate and often opposed forces. Guiding the refugees

from the sack of Nok into Callowan territory had been killing two birds with one stone, in that light.

It eased the pressure of Malicia's own granaries by displacing individuals who would have turned to banditry or rioting if left unfed while simultaneously forcing onto Callow a problem that could not be solved with a sword. Well, she conceded, that was untrue. If Thief and Adjutant had sent in soldiers to slaughter every refugee crossing into the kingdom's territory the flow would have abruptly stopped and there was precious little the Empress could have done about it without loosening her leash on the High Lords – which would be ill-advised, at this juncture. On the other hand, if the Woe were truly that ruthless this would be an entirely different situation. As things stood, Vivienne Dartwick must be chewing on the fundamental conflict between doing something good, namely not slaughtering desperate peasants, and seeing the immediate costs that good action imposed on her countrymen. It would fester, Alaya thought. In her and in the farmers displaced at Catherine's orders. The Black Queen might think of her land as more than the territory of tribes-made-kingdom, but few in even her closest circle shared that view.

The seed had been sown and conflict would grow from it. Enough, Alaya had judged, that it would weaken the fabric of the kingdom without collapsing it. At some point a compromise would be forged that pleased no one, slowly dragging back Catherine Foundling to the position Malicia preferred her in: that of an unpopular but unopposed necessary evil. If that strife could be carried to the heart of the Woe, so much the better. That band of children had already proved they could unmake the designs of empires, if allowed to run rampant. It was a private delight of the Empress that the results of her offensive must have Cordelia Hasenbach a throbbing ulcer.

"And yet," Dread Empress Malicia said, eyeing the walls that were not there.

She sipped at her wine. Beneath Catherine Foundling's own face, a blank space had been made. It was not that the girl's designs were unknown: Malicia was thoroughly well-informed of what was unfolding in the kingdom, despite Amadeus' best efforts. But there was a question, she thought, that must weigh heavy on the mind of every ruler on this continent.

Where the Hells was the Black Queen?

Callow might be somewhat stable, but it was one bad winter away from effective collapse. If Alaya ordered most royal granaries torched, starvation would afflict half the realm after the snows came. And yet, fresh off her failure in Keter, Catherine had disappeared into thin air. The Adjutant and the Thief had been sent back to Laure to settle affairs, but neither had the legitimacy to truly keep things under control. Was it mere negligence? Alaya was self-aware enough to acknowledge she disliked the girl on a personal level, and so was inclined to match perceived mistakes with personality flaws. Yet the Black Queen had proved surprisingly adept at the diplomatic game. Blackmailing the northern crusaders into leaving under treaty instead of risking extermination

had been inspired, as had been the request to join the Grand Alliance. Had the First Prince's grasp on Procer been stronger when the offer was made, Hasenbach might actually have gone for it. Not without losing a few feathers in the process, but the First Prince had already proved capable of cold pragmatism when the situation demanded it.

It wouldn't have mattered, in the end. The Dead King would have upended the board regardless. Yet the skill was there, however raw, and it meant the girl had *learned*. If she was capable of shaping a military campaign so it would lead to the kind of peace she desired, she should be able to recognize Callow without her was a house of cards. Something had forced her to seek another path, and the only true contender for that was what had taken place in Keter. The Black Queen was, at heart, still a soldier. In times of trouble, she would reach out for military force. It was the solution she was best versed in. Her options, however, would be few. The League would refuse out of hand, as the Hierarch was the mad puppet of the Tyrant of Helike – who'd sent her a lovely letter professing eternal friendship but was a man made from a mould rather familiar to Praesi. The Everdark was a mess of primitive warring tribes, effectively impossible to mobilize quickly and highly unpalatable allies regardless, which left only two real options: the Kingdom Under and the fae. Malicia had been made aware that the dwarves were in yet another expansion phase, meaning they would refuse to get involved with surface affairs.

That left the sole remaining Court of Arcadia, to which the Black Queen already had ties.

There was a very real chance, Alaya admitted to herself, that within the next six months a horde of fae would come pouring out of gates after Catherine struck bargain with them. It was madness, of course. Giving their kind stronger foothold on Creation was a blunder all living souls would pay for. But fighting fire with fire was Catherine's signature, and the Dead King's entrance in the melee might very well have been enough to quiet her doubts. Of all the nations currently involved in the Tenth Crusade it was the Empire that would find it easiest to defend against such an incursion, given its heavily warded cities and high number of skilled mages, but Praes was already under assault by the Ashurans. Deep raids into the Wasteland that left the forces of the High Lords untouched could become a catastrophe, and there was no doubt the Black Queen's advisors were learned enough of Praesi affairs to know this even if she herself might not be fully aware. Thalassina, then, had become the crucible on which her reign would be decided. If Ashur could be removed from the equation, an attack on the Empire became a very different affair. Wekesa and his son's preparations were of the highest import.

It might be necessary to arrange a failure to protect Hierophant from vengeful nobles after it took place, even if the consequences would be dire. She'd mull on it. She was fond of the young man, personally, and had found him a breath of fresh air on the few occasions they'd met. He was also, unfortunately, one of the most dangerous war assets of the Kingdom of Callow. A compromise might

be possible through Warlock, she thought, who'd certainly prefer his only son be imprisoned for a few years rather than involved in a brutal knife-fight between the Woe and the Empire where death was a real possibility. Wekesa had made it clear he was willing to break a few pots if it meant return to normality would follow. Like her, he knew that disposing of contentious elements would lead to recriminations in the short-term and reconciliation after the storm had passed. It would be the ugliest disagreement they'd had, and one that would taint their relationship for decades, but Alaya was nothing if not patient.

There was no knock on the door. Anyone requiring such announcement would have died to the wards in the hallway. The sound of the steps, though, could allow Malicia to discern the identity of her visitor. The four servants allowed access here had different strides, as did the sole other person with a token.

"Ime," the Empress said, greeting her guest without turning. "An unexpected pleasure."

He spymistress observed the niceties, coming before her to kneel before rising. Not quite as fluidly as she used to, Alaya noticed with grief that half-surprised her. Ime had grown old, though her body's appearance did not betray it. Yet rituals could only accomplish so much, and eventually a cloth stretched too far would snap. It might be twenty years yet before that happened, but it was as inevitable as the sun rising.

"My Empress," Ime said.

She remained standing. There was no other seat here, entirely by design. None save her should be encouraged to linger.

"I take it there has been a fresh report from the Eyes," Malicia said, brow quirking.

Her little retreats into the Windless Salon were, while not exactly forbidden from interruption, not to be lightly trespassed on.

"Our agents in the Principate managed to get urgent news through the scrying relays," the spymistress said, then hesitated. "Lord Black's legions are in full retreat through lands they've already pillaged. The Dominion's armies are in pursuit."

Alaya hid her surprise. She'd believed she'd grasped Maddie's intent when she'd seen what principalities he was targeting – namely, the loudest opposition to Hasenbach in the Highest Assembly. But he should have been heading south or across the lakes, not doubling back. It was the hesitation that gave it away.

"Ime," Alaya said quietly. "Tell me."

"We're not sure what happened," the spymistress admitted. "But there's a town full of corpses where he allegedly stole the Proceran fleet and there's been orders out of Salia to reclaim the barges."

Her mouth, she found, had gone dry.

"He won't have stolen a fleet alone," Alaya said. "The legionaries with him?"

"The orders from Salia did not mention opposition," Ime grimaced.

Her stomach clenched.

"I don't believe he's dead, Malicia," her spymistress softly said. "I know it's not much, but Hasenbach has sent people to speak with the shopkeepers on the central avenue of Salia."

Alaya's lips tightened. Her teeth clenched to tightly it felt like they would shatter.

"A parade for the heroes," she forced out. "Celebrating his death."

"A triumph," Ime countered. "As the Miezans once held. Displaying a foe taken prisoner. He would make for a *very* useful hostage. He has influence with every single force on their eastern front."

"Do not," Malicia quietly said, "coddle me."

"This is my professional opinion," her spymistress assured her. "They have to know that outright killing him would get the Ranger to come out swinging."

She grit her teeth. Unpleasant as it was to her, it was not untrue. The question was if they'd *care*, given the number of heroes on the field. Hye was dangerous but she was not invincible and her draw with the Queen of Summer had caused her heavy wounds she'd yet to recuperate from.

"Mobilize the Eyes in strength," Alaya said. "I want answers."

Ime's lips thinned.

"My Empress, moving so openly would-"

"I don't care if we have to out every agent in that misbegotten fucking hole they call a country," Alaya hissed. "*Find out if he's alive.*"

Ime nodded slowly and the Empress forced her hands into her lap, where her fingers could not be seen to tremble.

"And pass this along to Wekesa," she added tiredly.

Ime hesitated once more. Alaya's fury spiked, though she mastered it.

"He might leave Thalassina," she said.

"If Maddie's. . . " she began, then faltered. "Warlock would know. They have arrangements. And he'd know I kept it from him. Besides, whether it is revenge or rescue he will not act until Scribe contacts him. Keep an eye on that, she may know something we don't."

"I will," Ime said.

A heartbeat passed.

"And yet here you stand," Malicia said.

"We must prepare," Ime said, "for all eventualities. If he is truly dead, the balance with Callow has shifted. If he has been captured, perhaps some matters should be considered with a fresh eye."

Calm, she thought. *A pond without a single ripple, so they only ever see their own reflection.*

"The Callowan situation has changed already, simply with what you've told me," Malicia said. "Get in touch with our envoy in Laure. The full terms of my pact with Keter are to be revealed."

"The initial plan," her spymistress carefully said, "was to wait until the Black Queen's return."

"It also relied on him being a restraining influence against the notion of war on the Empire," Malicia said. "That can no longer be counted on. We need a new guarantee that she won't gate in and burn a few miles of farmland to the ground every time she's provoked."

Ime nodded.

"I know you might be reluctant to explore the full spread of options, if he has been captured," she said. "But it is my duty to speak."

"Then do so," Malicia flatly said.

"If he's jailed in Salia, it might be best to simply leave him there," Ime said. "Temporarily, at least. It would be an opportunity to bring his legions back into the fold, and he can be freed after the situation in the Wasteland is made less volatile."

Malicia forced herself to consider it with cold eyes. While the legions who'd followed Amadeus to the borders and turned back the invasion at the Vales were not exactly in rebellion, it was undeniable they'd acted against her intent. She'd long known that if there ever came a day when call was made on the loyalties of the old guard, it would not be her most of them chose. The urge had always been there to dismiss the issue as a mere theoretical, but a Dread Empress of Praes could not afford that kind of hopeful thinking. She'd had measures in place for decades, telling herself it would no matter if she never used them. She still had not, and would not unless she had no other choice. Yet much could be accomplished by the more mundane leverage was speaking of – presented with a *fait accompli* after his release, Black would likely be forced to abandoned his most recent designs. Dangerous as he could be, without an army he was just a man.

"No," Alaya said.

"My Empress-"

"I will not repeat myself," she said. "The risks are too high he'll be executed if he's allowed to remain in their grasp for long. He is to be freed at first opportunity."

"You are not thinking about this clearly, Malicia," Ime softly said. "I know you feel like you owe him. I do as well. But there comes a time when debts have to be weighed. A life spared – or saved – is not a life owed."

The laughter that ripped out of her throat was not kind.

"Is that what you think this is?" Alaya mockingly said. "He spared your life after you helped butcher his kin with the Heir's, and because he withheld the blade you *understand* us."

The spymistress grew stiff in her stance, but did not disagree.

"I wish this were about something as petty as debt," Alaya murmured, knowing it a lie. "How easy that would be."

How could she tell this familiar stranger that they had been one for so long some days she could hardly tell where she began and he ended? Maybe debt could have been the sum of them, if after the civil war he had treated her a figurehead – as was well within his power. If he'd proved himself yet

another cage, this one gentler than the last but no less a prison for it. But he'd understood, that it was not comfort or a furious avenger she craved. Kindness, consolation, all the sweets words their tongue could offer. Those things she could have measured and paid back in full. But instead she'd been offered something priceless: a world of endless paths, and someone to walk them with her. *Debt*? She might as well try to weigh the worth the breath in her lungs, the blood in her veins. She was not Catherine Foundling, to carve out pieces of her own soul at a whim.

"I have you orders, Lady Ime," Malicia spoke into the silence that followed. "See to them."

Her spymistress was not so gauche as to show even the slightest hint of disapproval after being dismissed, though there was no doubt it was there. It did not matter. She had been taught better than to overreach.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," Ime said, bowing low.

Her steps whispered out of the room, leaving the Dread Empress of Praes alone with her thoughts. Her carefully woven surroundings seemed mockery now, a reminder that no matter how orderly she made her world chaos would always crawl in through the cracks.

"I warned you," Alaya spoke into the empty salon. "Gods, I *warned* you. That it was not sustainable, that one day you would make a mistake and that'd be all it took."

And yet she had not acted on it. Because he'd been so sure, because it would have killed the heart of him to be made to sit at her feet. Caged. And he'd won, hadn't he? Again and again and again. As so she'd not spoken the words. She should have. Better to wound him than to sit on the other side of the continent, wondering if his corpse was floating face down in some foreign lake. *Mistake*, she thought. It was too bitter a word to be called rueful.

"We will survive," said Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. "You and me and the others. This empire we raised. We will survive this, as we have all other dooms."

But if Cordelia Hasenbach and her pack of pale-clad killers had done it? Oh, she was not seventeen anymore. She was not bleeding from the mouth, incapable of rising as the Sentinels nailed her father to the floor.

If they'd killed him, Alaya would give him an empire for a pyre.

Interlude: Apostates

> "There is greater power in severing than binding, in releasing than capturing. The most fundamental act of will is to cut."
>
> Translation from the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Thalassina was old.

Some scholars believed it to be the first Praesi city, though Wekesa's own studies had hinted at Kahtan holding the title instead – the three oases of its site had been a natural draw on the nearby Taghreb tribes of the Devouring Sands. Still, it had undeniably existed longer than Ater or Wolof which in these modern days tended to be considered the two greatest cities of the Empire even though Thalassina's population was near the double of Wolof's: three hundred thousand inhabitants, give or take a few thousand. The city's fortunes tended to rise and fall with the state of the sea trade that was its lifeblood. It was almost absurdly wealthy when there was peace with Ashur and the League, growing fat off tariffs on grain and luxuries imported from foreign shores. When the ships ceased coming, however, its revenues dwindled and the large population became a stone around its ruler's neck. As it was the Empire's primary sea port, Emperors and Empresses had meddled with its ruling line's affairs more than they had any other's. Most of that meddling had proved to be costly blunders. Thrice there'd been attempts to raise an Imperial Fleet, two swatted down by the Ashurans sailing in to torch everything and the last made a failure by one of the foremost captains rebelling and going pirate. On occasion, however, reasonable notions had emerged.

Shatha's Maze was one of that rare breed.

Named after the ancient Warlock who'd built it, it'd been raised at the order of Dread Empress Maleficent the Second. She had prudently assessed that the victory she'd won against the Thalassocracy at sea had forged a very fragile peace, and that improving the defences of Thalassina before hostilities resumed was necessary. She'd set her Warlock to the task, opening up the treasury without qualms at one of the high historical points of Praesi wealth. The Maze was therefore unsurprisingly rather extravagant, but also one of the finest ward-based defensive arrays Wekesa ever had the privilege to witness. It had only

failed twice over the last six hundred years, both times to treachery instead of superior sorcery. Naturally, knowing this, the first thing he'd requested of High Lord Idriss was a thorough purge of any uncertain elements in the city followed by heavy restriction of who would have access to the Maze from now on. The ruler of Thalassina had taken the opportunity to thin the ranks of his vassals with imperial permission eagerly, and though Wekesa suspected most of the dead had been rivals and not liabilities as long as the liabilities were dead he hardly cared. With that preventative measure taken care of, he'd sat down with his husband and his son to plan how they would turn a defensive ward array into a death trap.

It was a fascinating problem. Shatha's Maze warded the waters to miles out of the city, except of course it didn't: it was, after all, one of fundamentals limits of sorcery that wards could not be made over water. Shatha's solution had been to anchor the workings in corals, artificially raised to crest over even the tallest waves. The Maze was not a single array, though it might seem like it at first glance. It was over three hundred small, self-contained wards extending only over their coral tower. The ancient Warlock had been brilliant, Wekesa would admit. Aware that she could not cover the waves with sorcery, she'd made it instead so that the effect would come from people looking upon her works. Some wards confused perception, leading ships to crash into spikes of rock beneath the surface. Others attacked minds directly by sowing madness and uncontrollable fury into all who saw them. Yet more contained direct sorcerous effects like flame and lightning, triggered by will or proximity. The full lay of the Maze was known only to a few, though he'd obtained a version when agreeing to Alaya's favour. It had been illuminating, teaching him that sufficient time and manpower could create what was effectively an array with no single element linked to another. There was, naturally, a catch. Thalassina was a trade port: it needed foreign ships to be capable of passing through in peace time.

Shatha's Maze needed to be activated, from twin underground facilities dug beneath the banks the adjoining coasts. The rituals involved were both long and expensive, as they essentially required three hundred separate ward empowerments done in quick succession. The Kebdana had been rulers of the Thalassina for the better part of five centuries and so ensured that they had a contingent of powerful and well-educated mages ready at all times to carry out that onerous duty, but those practitioners were unfortunately highly specialized because of it. Useless when it came to the kind of theoretical legwork needed to design a ritual meant repurpose the Maze, and Wekesa had neither the time nor the inclination to educate them. So be it. They'd chosen to waste their Gift on being beasts of burden, he would treat them as such. With Masego and Tikoloshe at his side, he hardly needed the help anyway. His son was arguably the finest magical theorist of his generation, now that Akua Sahelian was dead, and his husband had at least three millennia of first-hand observation of sorcery to call on. Even a devil as ancient as 'Loshe had difficult proving

truly creative, but his treasure trove of knowledge was priceless.

With such aides he should have no trouble, or so theory went. The practicalities proved to be slightly different.

"Sueton was a hack," Masego insisted. "Barely half his experiments are reproducible."

"This particular phenomenon is one of them," Wekesa replied flatly.

"Under controlled circumstances," his son objected. "If his results are this shoddy, the theoretical framework behind them can only be called flawed. There's no guarantee the explosions will cascade if we can't accurately predict the nature of the release."

"Petronian sorcery *has* a degree of unpredictability," Tikoloshe noted. "Not a subtle folk, the Miezans. Never prone to using a dagger when a spot of genocide would work."

"We cannot use Trismegistan formulae for this large a spell," Warlock said. "The precision required is beyond our workforce, and to be blunt we lack the power."

"Then make a master array and feed it with secondary rituals," Masego said. "If we begin accumulating power now and centre it on our own manipulation, Trismegistan sorcery remains feasible."

"That'd require at least six straight hours of direction on both our parts," Wekesa said, frowning as he calculated. "With absolutely no margin of error either individually or in concert. That's even riskier than going Petronian."

"It puts the possibility of failure in our hands instead of leaving Creation to roll the dice," his son grunted. "That can only be called an improvement on that abomination you call a plan."

"Perhaps a more diplomatic word could have been chosen, Masego," Tikoloshe chided.

His son's beautiful glass eyes swivelled under the eye cloth, brow raising.

"A thing that causes distrust or hatred," Masego quoted. "That is the definition. I assure you, it earned both from me."

"Redundancies," Wekesa said, ignoring the salvo. "If your issue is with the unpredictability, we set several triggers. It will make it difficult to predict the exact sequence, but-"

"- it won't matter if their fleet is deep enough in the Maze," his son finished thoughtfully. "Perfection is the enemy of functionality."

Wekesa blinked in surprise. Where had he learned *that*?

"This all rests on the Ashurans being unable to interrupt your little game," Tikoloshe reminded them. "They will have hundreds of mages trained from the cradle."

"Trained in Sabrathan sorcery," Wekesa said, the sneer implied.

Oh, there was no denying that the Thalassocracy's practitioners were the foremost in their fields. It was simply that those fields were so very narrow. The Gift was only cultivated two ways in Ashur: healers and ship mages. Ashuran mage-doctors could take the slightest ember of life and turn it into haleness,

making Praesi attempts at healing look like the fumbling of children. Their sailing-mages could quiet storms or craft them, steal sunken ships from the depths and ride the tides. Yet outside that particular set of specialties, they were rank amateurs. Unlike Praesi they'd never outgrown the sorceries taught them by their forebears across the Tyrian Sea. They refined but did not innovate, in large part because the Sabrathan theory of magic was so badly antiquated. Victory was the mother of stagnation, and after wiping out the Miezans in the Licerian Wars the Baalite Hegemony had gone from triumph to triumph. Embracing stagnation just as deeply as the empire they'd overthrown. They'd not been forced to revisit the foundations of their sorcery for centuries, after the rest of the world had moved on. No, Wekesa thought little of Sabrathan magic. Or of any other that emphasized something as mundane as natural talent over skill and intellect.

"Narrow in scope, yet no less effective for it," Masego said. "A hundred oxen cannot raise a pen but they *can* trample it."

"At best they'll be able to save a third of the fleet by submerging it," Warlock flatly said. "Most of their practitioners lack the ability to use the spells, and their methods are ill-suited to rituals."

"They could interrupt the sequence by detonating parts of it in advance with their own sorcery," Tikoloshe said. "It has been done before."

"Then we harden the wards from the outside, thin them on the inside," Wekesa said. "It will be tedious, but as an additional safeguard it will serve well enough."

"Someone will need to be among the corals," Masego disagreed. "To start the sequence again if it stalls. Your schematic works in principle, but only if the possibility of Ashuran intervention is removed."

Warlock's lips tightened. He was not wrong. Much as he held Ashuran sorcery in contempt, dismissing it outright would be a blunder. There were no heroes here to muddle the mixture, but mortal ingenuity could be just as dangerous. The trap could not be sprung twice, it would wreck the Maze. Which meant if too few Ashuran ships were sunk, Thalassina was stripped of its finest defence while the enemy remained on the prowl. Alaya had made it clear that if the city fell there would be major unrest in the Empire. Nok being put to the torch was one thing, its ruler was by far the least influential of the High Lords and a former Trueblood besides. If the Dread Empress of Praes failed to shield even her oldest allies, however, there would be waves. Much as Wekesa despised the notion of having to stay in this city to protect idiots, he despised even more the prospect of having to put down a rebellion against the Tower.

"Agreed," he finally said.

"Good," Masego said. "I'll require some accommodations on my perch, which I assume will need the permission of High Lord Idriss before being made."

"No," Tikoloshe immediately said, before Wekesa could speak the word himself. "Absolutely not."

His son cocked his head to the side.

"Father is the best fit to oversee the ritual from the city," he pointed out. "It is primarily his design. What follows is obvious."

"The risks are much higher out there," Warlock said. "If the sequence fails-"

"- I will handle the matter," Masego interrupted. "If you believe your plan to be sound, any risks posed to me are irrelevant. If you do not believe your plan to be sound, this conversation is an exercise in pointlessness."

"You are perfectly capable of overseeing the ritual yourself," Wekesa said. "There is no need to discuss this further."

"I am capable," his son agreed. "But I am not the *most* capable. Logically speaking-"

"*Enough*," Warlock bellowed. "I will not allow you to stand in the middle of a fucking Ashuran fleet while we turn centuries-old wards into munitions. You are staying in the city, and that's the last we'll speak of this."

Heat spread across the room, carrying the faint scent of brimstone. His temper had loosened his hold. Slowly, Masego straightened in his chair. *He's almost as tall as I am*, Wekesa realized with muted surprise. Grown slender from his stay abroad, though his long braids and the trinkets woven into them made him seem larger. Robes stark black, eyes veiled, he looked like a stranger. A man grown instead of a boy.

"There has been quite enough of not speaking, I would think," Hierophant coldly said. "And my patience has officially *run out*."

—

They did not react to his words, not visibly at least.

But Masego felt the weight of what he'd spoken fall over the room and was glad of it. He'd hoped they would tell him themselves. That he wouldn't need to drag it out of them, that maybe they had a good *reason*. He'd grown, since leaving to fight in the Liesse Rebellion. Learned so much about himself and Creation around him, so much the revelations had carried him beyond the Name of Apprentice. If they'd recognized that, acted on it... It wouldn't have bound the wounds, no. Not entirely. But it would have mattered. Been measured on the scales of the betrayal. Instead here he was, expected to sit and pretend like they'd not *lied* to him his whole life. No, worse than a lie. They had hidden the truth after raising him to seek it above all else. What possible justification could there be for that?

"Masego," Papa said cautiously, "I do not know what-"

"You know," Masego said. "Or suspect, at least. I have been to Keter, fathers. And oh, the things I witnessed on that journey. The secrets I glimpsed."

"The Dead King lies," Father calmly said.

His eyes were dark mirrors, revealing nothing.

"So do you," Hierophant hissed. "He, at least, does not pretend otherwise."

"You don't understand," Papa sighed.

"A common consequence of being kept in the dark," Masego harshly replied.

"The dark," Father murmured. "The right term, used incorrectly. You were kept *from* the dark, my son."

"There is nothing in this world to fear save ignorance," the blind mage said. "You taught me this, once. The lesson should have been tailored to your deeds, if you did not want to be called to account for them."

Father leaned back into his seat, then drummed his fingers against the tables.

"What do you think death is, Masego?" he asked.

"Religion, now," the younger man snorted. "The resort of those without answers of their own."

"Let us speak of two Dread Emperors," the Warlock said. "One called Malignant, third of the name. The other called Revenant."

"The same man," Masego said. "Famously so."

Malignant the Third had killed himself through ritual and risen from the grave a year later, dethroning his successor and reigning again under the name of Dread Emperor Revenant. There'd been some rebellion when it'd become clear he intended on reigning forever, the first of the Wars of the Dead. He vaguely remembered Revenant being used as the basis for the legal argument that later excluded undead from claiming the Tower, though there'd been some other barely more interesting wars in between.

"I knew both," Papa said. "And believe this to be untrue."

He watched the incubus, looking for a lie and finding none. But they were both much better liars than he'd thought, weren't they?

"What came back shared much with Malignant," Papa continued. "Memories, thoughts, opinions. It was also fundamentally *other*. It was... a tracing of the man. A prefect imitation, yet still only that. An imitation."

"An interesting matter," Masego said. "Yet utterly irrelevant to this conversation."

"No. No it isn't," Father quietly said. "Because in one of the deepest vaults beneath the Tower, there is the most complete version of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness in existence. A third of the full text, and not contiguous. And it was there Malignant learned the foundations of the ritual that turned him into Revenant."

His fingers clenched. All these years, the knowledge had been there. In his father's memories, yes, but also *written on parchment*. And they'd kept it from him. The oldest, most important instance of apotheosis in the history of the continent and they'd hidden it away. His teeth clicked together so strongly his mouth almost bled.

"If you were under the impression this helped your case," Masego replied in a furious whisper, "allow me to disabuse you of that notion."

"You would have embraced the teachings," Papa said. "No matter what we said."

His Name flared, like a morning sun, sheer power wafting from his frame like smoke.

"And so Father bound you not to speak of it," he hissed. "So much for free will."

"I did not," Warlock said.

"Liar," Masego spat out. "You should not have taught me diabolism if you wanted to maintain that pretence. Papa is driven by *desire*. He had answers I wanted, what could possibly silence him except a binding?"

Gods, how many other hidden bindings were there? Had Father forced love as well? How could he tell if a single thing he'd seen or heard or felt was genuine? Had Papa baked because he enjoyed it, or because there was a rule that made him? The most sophisticated set of oaths in existence bound the incubus, decades in the making. Free will made by mortal cleverness, they'd called it. Could you really call it that, if there were *exceptions*?

"A greater desire," Tikoloshe said. "Of my own."

Hierophant bitterly laughed.

"Did you want me ignorant so badly?"

"I wanted to keep my son alive," Papa softly said. "Even if it hurt him. Even he hated me for it."

Masego flinched.

"You can't just-"

"You should have noticed by now," Father said, tone calm and even. "I'm told you've studied her physiology in depth, both physical and metaphysical. The signs must be there."

"No," Masego said.

"Catherine Foundling died at Second Liesse," the Warlock gently said. "What walked out of that fortress is an impression of the young woman made on the fabric of Winter, no more and no less. I'm sorry, Masego. I really am. I know you liked her. But even if the Black Queen believes she's the same person, she is not. Amadeus didn't realize it either, he doesn't have the learning. But he described what happened in the city to me. There can be no doubt."

"We hurt you," Papa said. "And for that, I will apologize. But not regret. Not if you are still alive to be hurt."

He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't not. He'd been told a theory and so it must be considered. He had observed a certain stiffness in thought in Catherine, an inability to deviate from goals even if it meant employing means she would have once dismissed out of hand. Believed it, back then, to be a consequence of the mantle becoming one with her soul – it would retain certain properties, which would be made inherent to her. It had been a reasonable theory. Or it could be that the imprint on Winter was limited in nature, and that the creature playing at being Catherine was incapable of deviating from it. He'd already known that her body was a construct, proved it.

Was her mind as well?

"Oh, child," Father sadly said. "It will pass. The first one is always the worst. But you do yourself no service by denying the truth."

Masego could no longer close his eyes. The closest he could come was to cease paying attention to what he saw. It was not a release. An effort of will was still required, and he abandoned the attempt after a moment.

"No," he said.

"Masego, I understand you don't want to-"

"This is not sentiment," Hierophant said. "I disagree with you on rational grounds. Even if what you say is true, it is irrelevant. She remains the same individual."

"You know that to be untrue," Father said.

"I am not the same person I was this morning," Hierophant said. "I have learned and changed. I am still Masego."

"The degree of change is different," the Warlock flatly said.

"And how does one decide on the appropriate degree?" he replied. "If I removed all my memories from age five to fifteen, I would behave differently. A part of what makes me would be absent, and yet I would still consider myself to be the same person. Assuming your theory is correct, the changes she went through are lesser than this. It is, therefore, irrelevant."

"You're being willfully-"

"Furthermore," Hierophant said, raising his voice. "If your theory is incorrect, you both kept me ignorant out of petty fear."

"Petty?" Papa repeated softly, and there was a rare thread of anger in his voice.

"I am no great scholar of niceties," he replied. "But even I know an apology that is not *apologetic* rings empty."

"Consider it withdrawn, then," Papa tonelessly said.

His heart clenched, but he would not bend in this.

"You could have told me," Masego said. "What you believe, why I shouldn't do it. But you didn't. You made the choice for me."

"That's what parents do, Masego," Father said.

He swallowed.

"I love you," he said. "Both of you. But I disagree. You didn't learn anything, you just... flinched. And apotheosis is not for the faint of heart."

"There are journeys," Father said, "that you can never finish. Because the person that left is not the same that arrives."

"There is nothing in this world to fear save ignorance," Masego replied, eyes burning bright. "And whatever may come, *I will not flinch*."

Interlude: Apogee

> "It is a bitter truth that in trying to escape the flaws of our parents we inevitably inherit the worst of them."
>
> King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

After they entered the second month of hard labour and sleepless nights, Wekesa jested that if he were a god he's snap his fingers and put them all out of their misery. Neither his husband nor his son graced him with even a perfunctory chuckle, which he found rather cold-blooded of them. Warlock had hoped that even disagreements, after being aired, would lance the wound festering in his family but it had been... overly optimistic of him. Tikoloshe was still furious that Masego had spurned his good intentions so fully, and their son had made it exceedingly clear that he'd be leaving Praes the moment the city was safeguarded and did not intend to return for many years. There'd been no talking him out of that, or even a way to broach the subject of the Black Queen again. His boy had learned to keep his own council, and while the way he'd grown stirred some embers of paternal pride in Wekesa it was also highly inconvenient. Message came from Ater within the first month, word of the war in the west.

It was not good news.

"He's not dead," Warlock told Alaya's envoy. "I am certain. Beyond that I cannot tell. Wherever he is cannot be scried even through his blood."

Which meant he was either underground or, more likely, in the presence of priests or heroes. It had slowed the work in Thalassina by a whole week to craft a ritual that would scry even through such distance and natural barriers, setting up relays and contingencies, but there'd been no question of doing otherwise. The silver of Amadeus' soul in his possession was still called to the remainder of it somewhere in Creation, but aside from determining death that measure was essentially worthless. His old friend's soul might not even still be inside his body, he knew, though that breed of meddling was rare among heroes. The Saint of Swords might be capable, though. Hye had told him, years ago, that Laurence de Montfort had grown skilled enough to rip a soul from its body with a swing of her sword. Was that what they'd wrought on Amadeus? Was

he now a shivering shade in a bottle sealed by some priest's power? Tikoloshe chided him for the thought.

"You are casting fear as fact," his husband said.

"We're not dealing with shepherd boys and rebels anymore," Wekesa murmured. "I've heard *things* about the Pilgrim, 'Loshe. The Saint might be the executioner for Above, but he's something rather more dangerous than that. He... smooths away wrinkles. His is a thinking man's Role."

"Scribe will find out the truth of it, and the Empress will put her weight behind the retrieval," Tikoloshe said. "Worrying any further is without purpose."

"I could leave," Wekesa said. "Head out right now."

"And do what?" his husband gently asked. "Traipse around the Proceran countryside with target painted on your back?"

Warlock sighed. Tikoloshe was right, of course. Moving prematurely was just asking to get into a fight with whatever heroes had not gone north to prepare against the Dead King.

"Gods, why would he wander around the Principate like that?" Wekesa bit out. "We're not twenty anymore, the wind's no longer at our back. And there's at least half a dozen Choirs embroiled in this mess, he was bound to run into someone he couldn't cope with."

"Making virtues of one's flaws does not mean those flaws are gone," his husband delicately replied.

Warlock sighed and left it at that. The two of them had never gotten along. Amadeus remained, even after over forty years, of the opinion that Tikoloshe was an unnecessary risk that should have long been dispensed with permanently. He was polite enough not to mention it anymore, but the years had not changed his position by an inch. 'Loshe had frankly admitted that the sheer bleak intensity of Amadeus' desires, coupled with utter disregard for the incubus' existence, made him uncomfortable just to be in the presence of. Like putting fingers over a candle: tolerable for a pass, but painful if continued. Masego spent several hours conferring with his comrades in Laure when he was told the news, weaving some particularly vicious protections on his scrying spell. Woe unto whoever tested those, Wekesa had mused. There'd be a few more dead Eyes in the city by the time that conversation was over. Not his issue, regardless. While he recognized that Alaya had right to try eavesdropping on the conversation, his son also had right to privacy. The victor of that skirmish would be theirs to determine, and he saw no need to intervene so long as no harsh feelings were incurred on either side.

They returned to the work with renewed vigor afterwards, but as the weeks passed tensions never fully put to rest reared their ugly heads again. It was not unexpected, truthfully. Long hours of mentally exhausting work with little rest or company save each other – Masego had bluntly refused to attend court again – made small irritations seem large, and when the bottle was uncorked there was no preventing the spill. It was darkly amusing, Wekesa thought, that it was an attempted olive branch from Tikoloshe that'd been the spark to

light the fire. His husband made an offer to discuss his time in the Kingdom of Sephirah, should Masego promise not to delve in that branch of research afterwards. Warlock had given it even odds that it would lead to either the beginning of reconciliation or a blowout, but his predictions proved inaccurate. In both cases, he'd believed the impetus would come from their son.

"That won't be necessary," Masego simply said.

The three of them had gone to the Maze with dawn, and it was now mid-morning. Both mages hung from their spits of coral by leather harnesses, their engraving tools made to hover by their side by a quaint little Taghrebi spell. Tikoloshe was perched atop Wekesa's own coral, comfortably seated and keeping an eye on their work for mistakes. All of them were under illusion, naturally. High Lord Idriss might have purged the city, but Warlock would not rely on the man's work when his family's safety was at stake. Their modifications to Shatha's Maze would remain hidden until the very last moment.

"It is not the Book of Darkness," Tikoloshe conceded. "Yet my remembrance is likely more than you'll ever learn otherwise."

"I would not be moved even if you offered the Tower's own text," Masego replied, placing back his carving knife into the floating set and picking up a chisel.

"Surely you don't mean to bargain with the Dead King," Tikoloshe frowned.

"Unnecessary," their son said. "I've already harvested sufficient knowledge from his echoes."

"Pardon me," Wekesa said. "Did you say his *echoes*?"

"His apotheosis left a reflection in Arcadia, yes," Masego replied absent-mindedly. "I took from him twice, at a pivot and later from his final moments as mortal. Vivienne was displeased about the delay on our trip back, admittedly, but the Hunt would not move without all of us."

There was a soft sound as he angled the chisel against an accumulation rune, bringing down his hammer to connect it with the fresh additions. The only sound for a long moment was the waves around them.

"You stole memories from the Dead King's reflection," Tikoloshe quietly summarized. "Child, have you gone mad?"

"Debatable," Masego mused. "I am not certain if operating on a different set of logic should truly be called that."

"Don't you give me lip like this is some trifle," 'Loshe snarled. "Get rid of them this instant. It's an *infection*."

It went downhill from there. Wekesa could not stay out of it, for he shared some of his husband's worries in this, but he could not serve as a mediator if he was also arguing. That proved to be a mistake. Tikoloshe had become emotional. That never worked well with their son. It was bad enough they ceased working for the day, walking back to the shore in fuming silence. Warlock ran into a wall when he tried to tease out details during the afternoon, Masego stubbornly refusing to speak more of the matter. Against his better judgement, he offered his son a concession: he'd get to participate in the ritual from inside

the Maze instead of the city, if the subject was opened again. It worked, or close enough. Masego remained vague on details, but it was clear his son could probably transcribe half the Kabbalis Book of Darkness from memory if he were so inclined – and that was the least of it. It was not the diluted knowledge put to ink he'd gotten his hands on but the thoughts of the Dead King himself. Secrets known only to one, until now.

"Take it out," his husband said later that night, when they were alone in their room. "By force if need be."

"I'm not going to fight him, 'Loshe," Wekesa replied with genuine surprise. "Obviously we need to reconsider our approach, but-"

"You don't get it," Tikoloshe said quietly. "It's a trap. I don't know for sure, but I've seen the lay of it over the years and. . . "

"You've never spoken of this before," Warlock softly said.

"I don't know for sure," his husband repeated. "And it was never an issue, with the mere fragments of his work Praesi possess. But I think he's been killed before, 'Kesa. The Dead King. With that many heroes having fought him over the years? At least once, one will have slain him."

Wekesa was not without cleverness, and he'd been married to the man for a very long time. The implication was not difficult to divine.

"You think the Book is a lure," he said. "And anyone that follows its teachings deep enough. . . "

"He can inhabit different bodies, he could even as a mortal," Tikoloshe said. "But how useful would it really be to wear some farmer's skin? No, he'd need mages. Talented, ambitious, well-trained in the use of their powers. And to ensure they made their way to him, seeds were sown."

"Never the complete book, because then they might realize the purpose of it," Warlock murmured. "There'd be risks, 'Loshe. If Amadeus is right about the Wandering Bard-"

"Black isn't even a *hundred years old*," his husband hissed. "And he thinks he can grasp the nature something like the Bard? Last time he followed that conceit Sabah was killed. Do we need to lose our son to his pride as well?"

"Peace," Wekesa said. "You've said it yourself, this is only a theory."

"I will not gamble with his safety, Wekesa, hear me well," Tikoloshe said. "Not when the stakes are this high."

"If I raise my hand against him, we lose him for good," he replied. "Think about this clearly."

"We lose him deeper still, if we do nothing," his husband said.

Gods, what a mess this had become. Maybe if memories were modified. . . No, he'd find out eventually. Masego had been taught to assess the state of his own mind before he'd even reached puberty, he'd notice sooner or later. It was only pushing the issue back by a few months or years. Part of him insisted this was only a theory, but he could not refrain from considering it. 'Loshe would not be this incensed if he did not genuinely believe in what he'd said, and he knew better than to dismiss the thoughts of his husband out of hand. It would

be easier if he was wrong, but he could not put weight on something simply because it would be more convenient were it false.

"Tell me everything you know about this," Wekesa said. "Every single detail, no matter how insignificant."

Tikoloshe's eyes met his.

"And if you agree I'm right?"

Warlock grimaced, but went on.

"Alaya has made inquiries about putting him under house arrest until this Callowan mess is over with," Wekesa admitted. "I might have to take her up on them, until we've found a permanent solution."

"After the Ashurans are dispersed, then," Tikoloshe said.

Warlock reluctantly nodded. He'd need at least that long to prepare, if it was to be painless.

—

It'd been easier when Catherine had been there to provide ice. Winter-forged substance had a keen affinity to scrying spells, especially those involving the Observatory. Less than surprising, given that she'd provided quite a bit of the power involved in the raising of it. Without her around, Masego had been forced to rely on the more traditional methods of a water-filled bowl. The link was rather solid, given the distances and likely interferences involved, which warmed his heart. His work in Laure had proved fruitful. The waters shivered and a pair of silhouettes greeted him, both familiar. They must have been standing in front of one of the pools, he thought. Hakram looked exhausted, his face tight and the ridges around his eyes standing out – the orc equivalent of dark circles in a human. Vivienne, on the other hand, was flushed with good health. She'd grown out her hair, Masego noted. It suited her, made her seem almost regal.

"Hierophant," Hakram said, showing just enough teeth to be respectful.

There was a pause as Masego's eyes took in all of him.

"You seem to be missing a hand," the mage observed.

Vivienne snorted.

"Literally the first thing," she said. "I told you he'd skip right over greetings."

"Already was when we last spoke, the bowl simply did not show it. And I still have the one," Hakram told him, ignoring the Callowan. "It serves well enough."

"Two would objectively serve better," he pointed out.

"If we're to have this conversation, it will be in person," the orc said. "And over drinks."

Ah, one of those complicated matters then. It should prove a learning experience.

"Youève made contact days before I next expected you," Masego said. "I take it something happened?"

"You could say that," Vivienne grimaced. "The Empress' envoy sung us a pretty song, and we need to pick your brains over it."

"I do not know much of singing," he admitted.

"I mean-" she sighed. "Never mind. Look, we were made privy to the full content of Malicia's pact with the Dead King."

"Does it matter?" Masego asked, mildly surprised. "I was under the impression we would oppose both regardless of the technicalities involved."

"I believed that as well," Hakram gravelled. "Before he finished speaking. She effectively sold out most of Calernia."

"Which seems ill-mannered, considering she does not own it," Masego offered.

"The definition of 'most' is what matters, as it happens," Vivienne said. "There's a clause that exempts Praes and Callow from his attentions."

"Which is good," he tried.

"Somewhat," she said. "Unfortunately, it only applies so long as she's alive."

Huh. Which was not good, because Catherine had admitted some months ago she would most likely have to kill the Empress before the war was over.

"We've asked some of our mages, but it's not their specialty," Hakram said. "We need to confirm – is it theoretically possible for a magical contract to have a clause like that?"

"It is exceedingly dangerous, but yes," Masego replied.

"*Shit*," Vivienne said, with feeling.

"I do not see the issue," he admitted. "Considering we were planning war against the Dead King regardless we have lost nothing."

"She's kept it secret for now, but it's likely she'll make the terms openly known when she judges the situation ripe for it," Hakram said. "That's going to make a mess."

Masego's brows rose. Would it? He failed to see how.

"Public opinion, Zeze," Vivienne said. "It'd be bad enough if we came out on Procer's side after they took a swing at us, but if on top of that we have a guarantee Callow will stay safe? War will be *highly* unpopular. Even war against Praes, if the Empress stays quiet from now on, and she's too clever not to."

Ah, politics. Hardly his specialty.

"If you could provide me the exact terms, I'll study them for weaknesses," he offered.

"We will," Hakram said. "But there might not be a point. There's no guarantee she gave us the real phrasing. And if she has, she'll have had every good diabolist in her employ look it over first."

"I have time during the evenings," Masego shrugged. "And without my library and my laboratory, only so much to spend it on."

"There's nothing to lose in trying, at least," Hakram said.

He nodded.

"If I may ask, do you have news of Uncle Amadeus?"

Vivienne wiggled her hand in a manner that presumably had meaning, though he was not certain what it was.

"Getting word from the Jacks quickly has been harder since the Vales were shut," she said. "The best I can give you is that Hasenbach's agents from her internal spy network are out in force in Salia. Turning over every vaguely suspicious stone. I've had to recall quite a few of my people."

She frowned.

"Still, if she's cleaning up the capital that thoroughly it adds weight to the Empress' take in my eyes," she continued. "They might be bringing in the Carrion Lord for a good spot of jeering and rock-throwing. Gods know he's been hated like poison there ever since he started setting fire to everything."

It was a relief to hear it, and Masego felt a knot in his shoulders loosen. He'd lost enough family to wars already. If Uncle Amadeus had followed Aunt Sabah into the grave so quickly... No, it couldn't be allowed to happen.

"Which is worrying," Hakram said. "They have to know if he's kept prisoner there will be rescue attempts. If he's not dead it is for a reason."

"It does not matter what they want," Hierophant calmly said. "They will not keep him. Catherine will agree with me on this. So will Father and the Empress. We will lack no resources for the rescue."

"My precise worry," Hakram replied. "Procer cannot afford war on two fronts if one of those fronts is Keter. To execute Lord Black and break his legions makes sense, but to *capture* him? I can think of only one reason for that."

It took a moment, but he came to the conclusion.

"Bait," Masego slowly said.

"It neatly takes care of what they fear most about Cat, namely her ability to gate anywhere with an army," Vivienne said.

"More than that," Hakram said. "They'll be dragging the Woe and the remaining Calamities onto their chosen grounds. The full villainy of the east where they want it, when they want it. They're clearing house before turning their full efforts to the north."

"It has the Peregrine's fingers all over it," Vivienne darkly said. "The man's dangerous enough on the field, but if he has a few months to prepare? It's going to get ugly, Masego."

"She'll have a plan," he said. "She always does."

"Well, we haven't run out of lakes yet," Vivienne half-smiled. "So there's always that."

Masego's lips quirked in answer.

"Still no word from her?" he asked.

"None," Hakram said. "But she'd have returned by now if she wasn't making gains, it's been near five months."

Or she could be dead, Masego thought but did not say. Precious little was known of what would await their friend in the Everdark.

"And on your front?" Vivienne asked. "No sign of the Ashuran fleet?"

"They've either found countermeasures to scrying or they keep priests on their ships," he said. "It makes finding their whereabouts difficult. The raids have not ceased, but Father says they'd have to be fools to give that obvious a sign they were about to strike. There's no telling when they'll attack until they're visible from the coast."

"I'll spare no tears for that lot if you manage to bruise them," she said. "But be careful, Zeze. Don't risk yourself for a Praesi city."

He decided, diplomatically, not to mention his agreed-on position when the Ashurans would come.

"And it's going well with your fathers?" Hakram asked. "I know what you found in Arcadia shook you."

"It has been... difficult," Masego admitted. "There have been arguments."

Vivienne's eyes went sharp.

"Do you need a way out?"

He shook his head.

"I suppose you could call it a religious disagreement," he said.

"Coming from the average Praesi, that would worry me," Hakram mildly said. "Coming from you, I will confess to something sharper."

"It will pass," Masego said. "They simply need to accept I will not forever live on their terms."

His friend shared a look, but did not comment. He licked his lips.

"Hakram," he said. "Before Catherine left..."

He trailed off.

"Yes?" the orc encouraged.

The mage folded his arms together.

"No," he finally said. "It doesn't matter."

Adjutant's keen eyes appraised him.

"Are you certain?"

"Faith," Masego mused. "It is had or it is not. There is no middle ground."

"So I've heard," Vivienne murmured, eyeing the orc at her side.

"Then let's cut this short before the Empress succeeds at listening in," Hakram said. "I'll scry you again in an hour with the text we've received, Masego."

"I will be here," he honestly replied.

A round of farewells, and then he was looking down at simple water. A strange sadness lingered in the room, and he turned towards Indrani to comment on it before realizing she was not here. Masego frowned, brushing back a braid. It was not the first time he'd made the mistake, and he was growing increasingly uncomfortable over it. The sooner he was rid of this city and its trouble, the better.

In the end, however, it would be another month before the Ashurans attacked.

Bonus Chapter: Ye Mighty

> "Alas, though your jest was cutting this axe is even sharper."
>
> Dread Emperor Vindictive

The Lord of Silent Steps was in a pensive mood.

That was only right, as Ivah'idimas'iyanya'ajolig had found much to ponder of late. Being cast out of the Zapohar and forced to seek salvation in the Burning Lands had been meant as humiliation piled onto death, not mercy, and yet... here it was. Still alive, though months had passed. It was a strange thing to outlive one's despair, and stranger still to pass beyond it. Such a matter required contemplation, the guidance of the whispers in the Night, but now when Ivah sought those murmurs known to all of the Firstborn it found only laughter. Full-throated and loud in the complete silence that surrounded it, a clarion call of mockery. And so Ivah of the Losara Sigil knew itself then to be damned, bound forever to the endless white plain it saw when it closed its eyes. It was all it dreamed of, now. Treading a boundless field of snow under a night that knew no moon or stars, leaving neither footstep nor sound as it marched on nowhere. Never tiring, never ceasing. Chasing a cold void forever out of reach.

It was terrifying – and yet it also soothed, like nothing it had ever known.

Clarity was required, and so clarity was sought. Losara Queen was beyond granting such a boon unto the likes of Ivah, for the queen was more akin to a deluge than a person – sweeping all it came cross, drowning them in the depths of itself. One could not bargain with the tides, only obey or perish. Yet there were others, slayers of Mighty that followed in the wake of the flood, and first among them stood the Mighty Archer. It did not claim to be rylleh, yet acted every inch of it regardless. It was presumptuous for the likes of Ivah to approach a superior unbid, though it did regardless as there was great need. It was sprawled against broken pillars, feet propped up close to the flames of a fire as it roasted cuts of silin meat over the flames. The sight of it made Ivah uncomfortable, for it was very unnatural. Humans, it was well known, ate only herbs and stones – as a learned Mighty, Ivah knew the stones were eaten not for sustenance but to help digestion – and became struck with terror

when away from the light of the sun. The Mighty Archer must have blood from another race, for there could be no other explanation.

The Firstborn knelt facing the Mighty, arms and hands angled so that it could be seen it held no weapons. The human's strange coloured eyes flicked to it, curious.

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I would have guidance in matters of damnation."

"Oh boy," Mighty Archer sighed. "I am *nowhere* drunk enough for this."

Boy. This was cattle-term, yes? Was the Mighty implying such worries as he had expressed were only fit for cattle? Ah, it was reminding Ivah of the ancient text 'Seven Husks of the Moon', which stated that the pursuit of Night was holy act and therefore no ill could come of it. The Lord of Silent Steps slowly nodded. Mighty Archer was truly learned, to know of this.

"Yet in estrangement from the Night, do we not lose our purpose?" Ivah asked.

"Where's fucking Hakram when you need him?" Mighty Archer said. "Look, Ivah, you've got the wrong woman for this kind of talk. Purpose isn't really my thing."

Ivah blinked.

"Should purpose not be sought?" it asked.

"Take it from me, sweetling, the big picture stuff is better left to the worriers of this outfit," Mighty Archer said. "You and me, we're sword arms. It doesn't have to be complicated for us."

The Lord cocked its head to the side.

"Then our purpose is the purpose of Losara Queen," it said. "For it can see what we cannot."

"Now you're getting it," Mighty Archer encouraged. "Sure we've got our rough edges, but this is a pretty good band as these things go. We've even done proper villain stuff, which should tickle your Evil pickle. Abducted a princess the once, and we even stole the sun a while back."

The Firstborn choked.

"Mighty Archer, I would have understanding," Ivah said. "By speaking the sun, do you mean light?"

"Nah, it was the actual sun," the Mighty replied, scratching its chin. "Thief swiped it from that princess we kidnapped. Although we couldn't find a way to pawn the damned thing and Summer ended up stealing it back, so I guess that one should be called a wash. We did ego-murder the two highest entities of fae royalty not long after, though, so all in all we came out ahead."

The Lord of Silent Steps swallowed, mouth gone dry.

"Is it not the power of the Splendid that we wield?" it asked.

"That kind of shit doesn't just lie around, Ivah," Mighty Archer chided. "We had to murder, like, at least five royals to steal it. And the one duke, but I think that was just Cat making a point. Good times."

"It is said the eldest of the Splendid are as gods made into flesh," Ivah said.

The Mighty leaned forward and speared a cut of meat with its knife, bringing it to its lip and biting with relish. It chewed and swallowed, only then answering.

"So you wonder how we're still alive," Mighty Archer mused. "You're not wrong to ask. The Queen of Summer could have splattered us all over the ground without even sweating. But only if we'd fought her dumb, Ivah. If we'd gone brawling. So we didn't."

The knife was pointed at the Firstborn, steel glinting under the fire's light.

"It's why your Sve Noc is screwed," the Mighty continued. "Your entire people, really. If some of you were solemn Above-fellators you might have a shot, but this is a villain scrap. You won't get a story for armour or a last moment save from some meddling Choir. This is about who's willing to do the darkest shit to win."

"I do not understand," Ivah admitted.

"It means our enemies down here are trying to fight fire with oil," the monster grinned, baring teeth. "Hells, I'm no gentle flower but the other two? We've got the Doom of Liesse and the woman that put her down on our roster. I pity the fuckers who try to escalate against *that*."

Ivah saw it then: flickering red, embers and flame. On the steel, on the eyes, on the ivory teeth. Scarlet like blood and ruin, a glimmer of what was to come.

"So don't you worry about damnation, Ivah," the Mighty Archer said. "Because there's a lot worse than that coming for the people in our way."

She bit into the meat with sharp teeth, juice flowing down her chin, and Ivah prostrated itself before leaving as quickly as it possibly could. It had found answers, and become all the more troubled for them. The Lord of Silent Steps dreamt again, that night, but it was not of the endless white plain. It remembered terrible oaths spoken as it knelt in blood, drowning in an ocean of frost as its veins turned to ice and terrifying stillness claimed the world. And power, too, sister to that which it knew and yet so different. So *hungry*, a beast that could devour all of Creation and still covet more. Clarity still eluded it when it woke. And so Ivah sought the other creature that strode in the wake of the flood, the shade with scarlet eyes that burned so cold. It never slept, and in the early hours before most the sigil woke the Lord of Silent Steps found it waiting in the depths of the Crossroads. Beneath them Great Lotow was quiet, cowed.

Still quaking in the aftermath of the hour where the greatest sigil-holders of the city had been taken away without a trace.

The Mighty Shade was as a silhouette glimpsed in mist: transient, ephemeral and always treacherous. It sang of death to Ivah's senses, something ripped from the embrace of the grave and made to serve beyond it. Looking upon it was... difficult, now. Before it had been a shade of the dead given power and purpose, but since Ivah had taken oaths it sometimes saw beyond the façade. There were moments where it did not see scarlet eyes and scarlet robes but a

corpse with rotting dark skin, a bloody wound where its heart should be. The urge to kneel in its presence was overwhelming, battering away at the Firstborn's mind. Ivah might be Mighty, but it was mightier still. The Lord of Silent Steps waited in silence, standing besides it.

"You may approach, Ivah," the Mighty Shade said.

It did so, and knelt with the appropriate demonstration of weakness.

"Speak."

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I would have guidance in matters of damnation."

It laughed, as if delighted, and the Lord of Silent Steps shivered. The sound was a caress on its soul, the fingers trailing having nails like knives.

"My very trade, once upon a time," the Mighty Shade mused. "This ought to prove amusing. Do continue."

"I stand estranged from the Night," Ivah said. "Without purpose understood. This perplexes me."

The shade smiled, for a flicker a corpse's ugly rictus before it became smooth flesh again.

"It is natural to feel adrift after finding a new mistress," the Mighty Shade said. "It is Ivah that fears what it does not understand. You are no longer that person. Accepting this will grant you clarity."

The Firstborn was no fool, and so did not ask who it was now instead. Such questions had power, in both asking and answering, and it would not so easily grant it to the smiling death thing.

"Clever little drow," the Mighty Shade murmured. "She does have an eye for talent, doesn't she? You'll do quite nicely."

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I have sworn oaths and given service, but these things are not purpose. Fetters without sentence are senseless."

The shade's gaze burned scarlet, until it became sunken gold on desiccated skin. Ivah hid its disgust.

"So they are," the Mighty Shade said. "I will tell you, little drow, a story about two deaths."

The Lord of Silent Steps almost flinched.

"There was once a land of many kings and queens," the dead thing said. "They were proud and powerful, ruling over river, rock and sand. Many were their wonders, for they knew terrible secrets and flinched not at the cost of great works. For many years they warred, on each other and great realms abroad, and iron did sharpen iron."

The shade smiled dreamily.

"Then a storm shook the sea, and blew a single broken ship to their shores," the Mighty Shade said. "On it were strange and foolish men, lost and mad with thirst. These creatures were treated as curiosities, taught the tongues of the kingdoms and made to tell tales of their faraway home. They could have been snuffed out, my dear Ivah, as easy as snapping one's fingers."

The dead thing snapped its own, then laughed.

"They were spared, for they spoke of trade and wealth and fresh wonders brought to the kings and queens," the shade revealed. "And so another ship was built in a city of corals, and sent back."

The Mighty Shade fell silent.

"They returned, in time," the Mighty eventually said. "With many ships. Many men. And though they did bring wonders, they were wonders of war and great slaughter did come of it."

The dead thing leaned forward.

"And yet they could have been shattered like clay, Ivah," the shade whispered. "Had the kings and queens put aside their hatreds and seen what was to come. Instead they warred on each other still, thinking to use the strangers to settle their grudges. Cities fell, one after another, and when finally the doom was understood it was too late. The strange men clapped irons onto those once-proud rulers, for theirs was a war of chains."

The Mighty Shade shook itself, as if waking from a dream.

"This they called empire," the dead thing said. "They made a wasteland and called it peace, knowing not what they wrought. It would be many years, before the irons were broken. And even now their weight is felt, for inheritance is a manner of remembrance."

The Mighty looked upon Ivah, calm and depthless.

"Do you understand the meaning of this story, little drow?" it asked.

"The worthy take," the Lord of Silent Steps softly said. "The worthy rise."

"You reach the threshold of understanding," the Mighty Shade said. "Kind soul that I am, I will guide you across. The first death is in the story told. The second is in the story grasped. Purpose will follow."

"Many kingdoms died, in your words," Ivah said.

"One death," the shade said, "in many parts. There is reflection."

When understanding finally came, it was not gentle.

"Our ship came," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "Bearing three strangers."

"It's too late now, you poor creature," the dead thing murmured. "You invited us in. You would have purpose? It has already been granted to you."

Its smile was cold.

"Ours is the business of empire," the shade said. "And what a peace we will make, dearest Ivah. Oh, I think they will remember this one for a very long time."

"I am not estranged from the Night," the Firstborn croaked. "I make war against it."

"Tremble, ye Mighty, for a new age is upon you," the death thing laughed. "I was a slow learner in this, little drow, but I *have* learned. Iron is brittle. It breaks, no matter how sharp. So let us make something new instead, yes?"

Ivah's shoulder shook.

"Rise, Lord of Silent Steps," the shade ordered. "Our queen grows impatient. Today we take Lotow, and you have a role to play."

Night was beyond Ivah's reach, but the hunger was not.

—

The bridge was broken.

It was an old break, unlike that which he had earlier passed. The bridges linking the Crossroads to the Column had shattered when the eldritch gate had devoured part of it, yet the lay of them could be tread if one was careful. Ivah had been, leaping across chasms with a lightness beyond mortal ken and landing without a sound. An entire floor of Great Lotow's heart had been whisked away, leaving the Column above it to fall. It had partly shattered under the impact, and remained angled. Apt to tumble down if force was exerted. No doubt the sigils at the bottom were living in terror of this happening, shivering in their holes as they hid from the precarious balance above. Ivah cared little, having passed like a ghost through the wreck before descending to heights untouched by the wreck. Down into the centre of the city, where the most powerful of the sigils dwelled. Three of them were without their sigil-holder, but one had refused to the call for council. Mighty Zarkan had demanded tithe and alliance against a rival for price of attendance, and been duly refused: the Queen of Lost and Found did not brook such bargains.

No doubt the Mighty had puffed with arrogance upon learning of the council's outcome, praising itself for its foresight in avoiding doom. Had. For another gate had been wrought this morning, and it had been a sharp lesson. The Zarkan Sigil held three districts, Ivah had been told, that had once been the residences of the wealthy and powerful of Great Lotow. These districts would have been raised with wells and gardens, making them worthy prizes to take and hold. Ivah now stood before the largest of the three, and looked upon the wreckage with calm eye. The traces of Losara Queen's working could still be seen in the deep gouges around the mouth of the district were the edges of the gate had cut. The territory of Mighty Zarkan had been sealed shut for exactly the quarter of an hour. From the outside, anyway. The gate had spewed out a flood of icy waters that tore through the district mercilessly, drowning or crushing the slow and smashing houses and temples alike as if they were kindling. Corpses could still be seen among the rubble on the other side of the broken bridge, left to waft Night without harvesting.

The Zarkan were too terrified of a repeat to risk coming out of the highest places of their territory.

Ivah waited, standing in the open. They would see it, and come to bargain. It was not long before Mighty Zarkan made its way to the other half of the bridge, and the Firstborn studied it curiously. It was tall and proud, strong in Night and little marked by the killings that would have seen it rise. In the air, Ivah tasted fear. It wondered if it should feel kinship for this one, some sense of belonging that would stand against the oaths and purpose it had taken. And yet all it found was contempt. What a petty creature Zarkan was, shrouded in terror even as it painted courage over its face. Blind, lost, humbled by forces beyond its understanding. Did it regret now the demands it had made? No, Ivah thought, it would not. That was not the way of the Mighty.

The worthy took, the worthy rose. The only sin was death, for death was failure, and Zarkan still lived. What was there to regret? *And when finally the doom was understood, it was too late.* The Firstborn would squabble themselves into nothingness. The nerezim would slaughter them with wonders of war, or they would be broken into Losara Queen's service. Grief was due, it thought, but it did not come. Ivah had slain many in its time, harvested their worth and made it its own. It had not grieved then, had it?

"And now we do the same," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured, "to the Everdark itself."

Mighty Zarkan struck the foot of its spear against stone, demanding attention as soon as it arrived.

"Mighty Ivah," the sigil-holder said. "Rylleh to cattle. Speak your fill."

Ivah hummed, cocked its head to the side.

"Lord," it corrected, feeling out the foreign word. "Lord Ivah."

The other Firstborn spat into the deeps.

"You wear meaningless words for your sigil," Zarkan said. "Shame on you."

"What would happen," the Lord of Silent Steps said, "if the gate was kept for a full hours?"

Mighty Zarkan stilled.

"Would you drown, Zarkan?" Ivah smiled. "No matter. When the gate finally closes, you will stand utterly alone. A sigil of one. What a sight that would be."

"Losara is weak," the Mighty said. "It could barely slay Urulan."

"Is the first among your rylleh in this district?" Ivah asked.

"Are you threatening me?" Zarkan hissed.

"No, then," Ivah mused. "Good, it will simplify matters."

Without another word, it turned and began to walk away.

"Wait," Mighty Zarkan called out. "What do you want?"

Ivah turned. Fear was beginning to peek out from under the mask. How easily people came undone.

"Everything, Zarkan," it said. "We want everything. And you will give it to us, because otherwise you will die."

"I won't take oaths," the Mighty insisted.

"*Then you will die*," Ivah barked, fury taking hold of it. "Eldest Night, do you not see? We have *nothing* to bargain with. You can tell yourself this is only a single city, that the further cabals will break the thrust, but you are missing the point. This is not war, it never was. It is grave robbing and we lost before they ever set foot here. You think Sve Noc will raise a finger to end this? *They are following our rules.* Giving us what we want, every step of the way."

He laughed and the sound of it was brittle.

"I care not if you take the oaths, Zarkan," Ivah said. "It changes nothing. Someone filled with your Night will do so in your stead after you are slain. They cannot lose, because there are no stakes for them. They can only gain."

The Firstborn shook its head.

"We can only gain," Ivah corrected softly. "For if the only sin is death, mine is the business of empire."

"You speak madness," Mighty Zarkan said, face gone pale.

"Peace," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "I speak of peace, Zarkan."

Interlude: Inheritance

> "Dearest Edda, beloved daughter. I would offer you words of wisdom or comfort, but after a lifetime of ink I find my hands have finally taken leave of me. I have written of good and evil for many years, seeking truths, but in the end I have no answers to offer. All I have, my heart, is a prayer. That you be kind. That you leave the world a little better than you found it and teach your children to do the same. And maybe, just maybe, one day we will be what we pretend we are."
>
> Last will and testament of King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Wekesa had fought three wars in his lifetime, and had slowly come to realize that the Tenth Crusade was nothing like the others.

There'd been so many skirmishes over the years he could hardly recall all of them, so many faces and names and defiant – or accusatory, or castigating, or a hundred different tones only ever hiding the same fear – speeches. Enough dead heroes to make a mansion of the corpses. There was no glory in it, Warlock had known from the start. How many of those young men and women had soft faces, barely into adolescence? Those fights had not been part of a war, though Amadeus fancied otherwise when he murmured of his old argument with the Heavens. It'd been… ratcatching, Wekesa often thought. Trapping and killing vermin before they could grow to be a true problem. Even using the word execution would have implied a sentence, an act of judgement. There'd been none, though. Nothing behind the slaying save the decision never to allow those rats to grow and spread. It sometimes amused Warlock that for all his old friend's talk of the fundamental disparity between the lot of heroes and villains, when given the opportunity to deal out the same treatment he'd not hesitated for a moment.

It was not a deep argument, he knew. The differences were many. Amadeus' high-minded distaste was for a perceived imbalance between what heroes and villains as a whole were allowed to achieve by their stories, not particular cases, and the Black Knight would likely argue that even similar actions would have different meanings when carried out by mortals instead of Gods. Wekesa could and had appreciated, even when they'd first met, that Amadeus was driven by what could be called a philosophical principle rather than mere lust for power. It'd been a refreshing change, after the then-Apprentice's years spent rubbing

elbows with the nobility of the Empire. It was a deplorably limited understanding of the world, perhaps, but a notch above what any of their contemporaries had been able to contemplate. In the end, though, it was still missing the forest for the trees. Seeking redress for scales uneven was still putting stock in the scale itself, when it was that thing's very existence that should be questioned. There was no fixing Creation, Wekesa suspected.

And if by some miracle it was, the Gods would promptly break it again.

And so Warlock had put his energies where they rightly belonged: his research, his family and his friends. Disappearing into some remote locale to study in peace would have been short-sighted, unfortunately. An old monster alone in the mountains, meddling in things man was not meant to know? He would have been the proving grounds of a dozen heroes. Besides, keeping strong ties to Alaya and Amadeus' empire had secured to old libraries and a steady source of income and materials. If that meant occasionally making an appearance at court, disciplining a few ambitious sorts and smothering nascent heroism when it sprouted? Well, it was a decent bargain. He did not regret making it, not even now. There'd been some frictions before the understanding was properly reached, of course. Amadeus had wanted him to found some sort of mage academy that'd supplant the teaching cadres of the High Lords, and not quite understood why Wekesa had refused. He'd tried to lower the years Warlock would have spent as headmaster of the institution, before Wekesa flatly told him there was nothing to compromise over. Warlock had helped to create this 'modern empire' of theirs because it mattered to them, not because he himself particularly cared about the state of Praes. The country could be an empty desert and it wouldn't matter to him.

He'd fought the wars that saw them rise on personal grounds, not principled ones.

It was the worst argument they'd ever had and for that Wekesa blamed Hye, who'd left before the Conquest even ended, and managed to both cut Amadeus to the bone and leave him twice in love as before with the same sentence when she walked away. The wound had never entirely healed, and Warlock had ended up paying the price in a deadbeat Ranger's stead. Typical of her, really. She never stuck around for the parts that weren't thrilling, the sometimes tedious spadework of building and maintaining relationships. Tikoloshe had noted it was almost mythically hypocritical of him to blame someone for having bonds only on their own terms, but his husband was wrong. He'd put in the work, afterwards, to clean up the mess between himself and his oldest friend in the world. Hye, on the other hand, simply made do with visitations every few years that Amadeus came back from split halfway between longing and chagrin. Wekesa's long-standing reservations about that arrangement had been the tide that carried him closer to Alaya, as it happened.

When they'd first met her in the Green Stretch all those years ago he'd not been as close as Amadeus to the woman who became Malicia: he and Sabah had shared the seat of designated third wheel as those two strange youths gravi-

tated around each other, everything else falling to the wayside of their long conversations. Still, he'd found he well-educated for a peasant – her mother had been a tutor to a minor noble line, once – and as charming as she was intelligent. He'd considered her a close acquaintance, and been quite infuriated to hear she'd been unceremoniously abducted by the Sentinels because the waste of skin holding the Tower was hungry for seraglio beauties. It would be years before they met again, after bloodily climbing the ladder of influence, and when Wekesa next saw Alaya there were only shards of the girl she'd once been remaining. He'd grieved for that, but the woman she'd become had been fascinating. Broken, perhaps, but all the more brilliant for it. But there'd been a war on, soon enough, and though they'd fought for her claim his reasons for supporting it had been largely selfish. If Amadeus had been the one aiming for the throne, there would have been decades of war instead of years.

Praesi would have been violently disgusted at the notion of a Duni claiming the Tower, much less one inclined to eradicate the aristocracy.

In the years that followed, however, his opinion had shifted. Alaya was undeniably more fit to rule. She was Praesi in a way none of them were, understood the people she reigned over where Amadeus would have messily carved away at them until they were more to his liking. And though Malicia used the Calamities, she did so sparingly: she preferred to rule on her own merits, without other Named propping up her crown. She asked little of them save friendship and the rare favour. It was an ideal arrangement, in his eyes, and he'd frankly told her as much. The confluence in their opinions had only grown as the years passed, and while Amadeus busied himself with his Callowan projects Wekesa had spent long stretches in Ater for his research. Seen the harsh demands authority made of Alaya, and admitted to himself that Black would not have weathered them so well. The Tower... it magnified what you were. Your virtues, but also your flaws. Malicia had mastered hers, but the same influence would have made something ugly of Amadeus. Perverted his best qualities. Scribe disagreed, of course, but Eudokia had stark blinders. She'd only ever seen herself as a tool, Amadeus as worthy to use her, and so to use everyone else. There was no place for nuance in that perspective. That Sabah had never weighed in on the matter had been telling, he'd thought.

She was ever only so circumspect when coddling one of them.

And now Sabah was dead. Killed by some murderous vagrant from the Dominion at the behest of the Wandering Bard. Wekesa had wept for it, after. For the loss of such a beloved friend, for the hole she would leave in all of them with her absence. It'd not been the same since. Amadeus had become reckless while telling himself it was calculated risk, burning one bridge after another until it'd left him stranded in the middle of fucking Procer with heroic wolves baying at his heels. Alaya had been forced to become increasingly heavy-handed to keep it all from falling apart while simultaneously the particulars of the Woe prevented her from dealing with them as she legitimately should. Warlock had made it clear that Masego was off-limits, of course, but was increasingly coming

to sympathize with her situation. Wekesa and Amadeus had dropped a mess into her lap and then heavily restricted her means to deal with threats not of her own making. It was unfair, and the private admission of that had done much to reconcile Warlock with the necessity of putting his son under house arrest for a few years.

As for the Black Queen, well, Warlock had washed his hands clean of that. He'd help Alaya deal with the aftermath by making it clear to Amadeus that Catherine Foundling had been dead for over a year now, but he wouldn't have the imitation's blood on his hands when his old friend returned. He could hardly serve as a mediator if he'd taken part in the matter in need of mediation.

It'd all grown so complicated, hadn't it? This war was so different from all the others. The civil strife that had seen Alaya rise to the throne, the Conquest itself – they'd been of the same mould, in a way. They'd all been young or in their prime, and still making their mark on Creation. But now that mark was made, and they were being forced to defend it. They'd spread out too far, Wekesa often thought. Sabah had died thousands of mile away from the Wasteland, fighting over some League shithole they'd never seen before and likely never would again. Amadeus had been caught in Proceran heartlands while prosecuting a war that should have been the Black Queen's by right. That there was a Black Queen at all was a reminder of how badly the Callowan situation had been blundered over, and for all that Wekesa sympathized with Alaya she'd hardly handled the Wasteland better. Akua Sahelian should have been abducted year ago, every bit of knowledge wrung out of her mind before she was butchered so thoroughly not even devils would be able to get their due from her. If Malicia had needed a doomsday weapon she should have asked him, not tried to get clever in house already visibly on fire.

And the damned fire had only spread since. Wekesa was not pleased he had to intervene, but who else was left? It'd have to be him. The Ashurans would be broken here, and afterwards he'd free Alaya's hands to deal with the rest of the situation. Feelings would get hurts, cities would burn, but in the end the only people involved who mattered to him were pragmatists. There would be eternity to get over this little scuffle, as his friends had all the others before them.

It was a month full of long silences that passed before the Ashuran war fleet finally arrived. His son and husband remained at odds, though thankfully neither were the kind of men to trade barbs or seek out screaming matches. The work proceeded at a faster pace now that conversation had effectively died out. Wekesa occasionally felt a pang of regret at turning what was one of the greatest achievements of Praesi sorcery – in his own chosen field of study, to boot! – into what was effectively a pack of munitions, but he could think of no other way. Shatha's Maze had been the main sea defence of the city for too long. There'd been centuries of opportunity for the Thalassocracy to study it, and though last time they'd struck at Thalassina it had been treachery that'd

been their means of passing it that did not mean the Maze was unbreakable. That pack of greedy sailors wouldn't be risking an assault at all, if that were the case, and Alaya was certain that they were coming. She still had agents in Ashuran ranks, though entire swaths of her network had been purged before the Thalassocracy declared war.

The ships came under cover of night.

That much had been expected. With scrying being blocked off, it was now watchtowers that served as the city's first line of defence. Considering the nature of Ashuran sorcery, sailing at night even in treacherous waters was hardly difficult and afforded some element of surprise. What had not been expected was that the fleet moved under illusory cover as well. Some kind of sea mirage, Warlock found out, closer to natural phenomenon that Praesi illusions or fae glamour. Much harder to detect than either, though also likely much more difficult to maintain. That bought the invaders two days of unseen advance before they were caught out by a Thalassinan mage attempting to scry the weather ahead of their fleet and finding it impossible to do so. It alarmed High Lord Idriss enough that the man ordered a ritual strike at the area, calling down lightning from the sky, and though the sorcery impacted Ashuran defences harmlessly it did shatter the mirage. Ashur had stolen the initiative, and there was barely a day and a half to organize before they were on the city.

The work on the Maze was mostly finished, but not entirely. It would have to prove sufficient. Mass rituals by High Lord Idriss' mages lent a finishing touch to the trap while allowing Warlock and his son to remain at full strength. Masego's perch out in the corals was fully accommodated with defensive wards and the few creature comforts his son had requested, and he left for it half a day before the Ashurans arrived. The solemnity of the parting ease the tensions between them some, though not as much as Wekesa would have liked.

"I'd still be more comfortable with your father taking the position," Tikoloshe admitted, smoothing away nonexistent wrinkles on their son's robes.

"I see no need to revisit the matter," Masego bluntly replied.

Wekesa discretely shook his head while meeting his husband's eyes. Now was not the time.

"Be careful," Warlock said. "They might be meddlers but there are a great many of them. If it gets out of hand, I'd rather you retreat and we fight over the city itself."

"I've no intention of risking my life for Thalassina, I assure you," Masego said.

He nodded in approval. In this, at least, he had his priorities straight. Wekesa hesitated, then pulled his son into a tight embrace. Masego stiffened but eventually returned it, their clutch on each other growing tight. There were no guarantees, in war. They both knew that all too well.

"Come back to us," Warlock whispered.

"I will," Masego whispered back, voice little more than croak. "You two stay safe as well. I know you'll have walls in between, but rituals-"

"-are never a toy, always dangerous," Wekesa finished softly.

One of the first lessons he'd taught his son. Magic was beautiful and wondrous, but it should never be taken lightly. Great mages had believed themselves to have mastered their powers fully, and always paid for that presumption. There were no exceptions. They released each other and Tikoloshe kissed both their son's cheeks, fingers lingering on his shoulder. Masego was so *thin*, now.

"We'll have a family supper tonight," 'Loshe said. "Just us. It's been too long."

Masego nodded before heading out for the docks, where a ship would await him. They both watched him leave, standing together.

"He will not be that tender with us again for a very long time," Tikoloshe murmured.

Wekesa grimaced, but did not deny it. After today they'd have to bind his powers and take him into custody. He would not forgive them that for a very long time.

"Preparations are done," Warlock said. "The rest we can worry about tomorrow."

Work mercifully took away his mind from it all, for there was much still left to do. The set-up was not particular complex – Petronian sorcery was a straightforward as the Miezan's who'd created it – but it was rather laborious. Two-way scrying panels were set up along the city's outer battlements so that Wekesa would have good overview of the Maze and the Ashurans, then anchored in a crescent moon around him as the last touches were put to the circle of power where he'd direct the rituals from. That the defence was taking place on a High Lord's dime meant the very finest materials had been acquired for this, obsidian from the Grey Eyries and Callowan limestone mixing with half a dozen other substances that put together could have easily bought a luxurious mansion in Ater. As Warlock sat at the heart of the array, four more circles were initiated. Every practitioner in the city had been pressed into service for the purpose, which was rather simple: they were to release sorcery into their attributed circle, where Wekesa would be able to take it and use it for his own purposes.

The recent labour of activating the wards of Shatha's Maze had left too many mages exhausted and on the edge of burning out, sadly, which meant that to make up the losses two thousand criminals had to be slain and their life force provided instead. Wekesa disliked using such primitive means, but it could not be denied that the power resulting was pure and plentiful. If they'd had another week it could have been avoided, but as things stood he'd have to make his peace with it. It was late morning when the preparations were complete, and from that point forward Warlock sat with his eyes closed. Keeping mastery of four circles beyond his own while not actively using the power within required a great deal of concentration. Tikoloshe sat next to him, idly paging through

a rather lurid Proceran romance, and though his husband remained silent his mere presence was soothing.

The Ashuran war fleet came into sight halfway past Noon Bell, and so finally the battle for Thalassina began.

It was said that the Thalassocracy had more war ships than the rest of Calernia put together, and it was easy to believe that while looking upon their fleet. More than three hundred ships, flying the colours of the Baalite Hegemony with the masked sun of Ashur set on them. It was not even the full muster of Ashuran might, Wekesa knew. There were still ships out raiding, and smaller defense fleet left to anchor in the Ashuran home isle.

"Around third of those are repurposed merchant ships," Tikoloshe noted, his practiced eye picking up on the signs. "No ballistas on them, they'll be serving as troop transports."

"It won't matter, if they never make shore," Warlock replied.

Ashur took the offensive, as was only to be expected. By now they'd have realized that Shatha's Maze had been activated, though they should still be unaware of the... modifications added to it. Wekesa kept the four pools of power close at hand. Two of those, he'd already decided, would be kept in reserve to detonate the Maze. Only one was necessary strictly, speaking, but best to be prudent. The other two were his to shape in answer to Ashuran assaults, however. After that he would have to draw on his own power, which would be difficult. His preferred field of study was useless on water, and his knowledge of Sabrathan sorcery was limited. There would be no turning the spells around here as he had done when duelling the Witch of the Woods. It would have been madness to attempt the same tactics against an army that he'd used against a single Named, regardless. One Gifted he could account for, no matter how talented, but hundreds on hundreds? There were too many variables, even if they resorted to rituals. The waters ahead of the war fleet rippled unnaturally, and Wekesa learned forward.

"So it begins," the Sovereign of Red Skies murmured.

It was a ritual, that much was obvious. The limitations of their practitioners were fully displayed as massive amounts of sorcery sunk into the waves but moved only sluggishly: Ashuran mages were known used to working in concert.

"Strike?" Tikoloshe said.

Wekesa studied the sea's surface. The ripples were gaining in strength, but not *forward.* Splitting to the sides? Ah. He smiled.

"They believe the defence is being directed from the underground facilities on the shore," he said.

"We never took down the wards on them," Tikoloshe noted. "There was no reason to."

"Let them waste their first blow, then," Warlock said.

It was an interesting working, he had to admit. Tendrils of water rose from the sea and began spinning like gargantuan drills, impacting the shore with thunderous crack and going straight through the rock. Quicker than simple

water should, even rotating. A hardening effect, perhaps? He could see no trace of it, but there was only so much he could find out at this distance. If there'd been anyone underground, they would be dead by now. Eventually the Ashurans released their ritual, the water collapsing. It was either drunk by the earth or remained in large puddles, save for the parts that trickled back into the sea.

"And now they see there are no issues with the Maze," Tikoloshe said. "Meaning it was either never overseen or they struck at nothing."

"Even if they'd wiped out our mages most the wards would still be working," Wekesa noted. "That cannot be their strategy whole."

His statement proved to be correct when ritual began again. It had similar effect on the sea as the previous one, though Warlock noticed the sorcery was going broad instead of sinking deep. Interesting. Not tendrils this time, then.

"They're going around it," his husband suddenly said. "They don't need tides if they can make their own wind, 'Kesa. They're going to spread sea over shore and bypass the Maze entirely."

"They will try," he shrugged, and reached for the first pool of power.

If the ritual was allowed to proceed and stretched out the waters on both sides it would be difficult to deal with – he'd either have to split the power and pit himself against the enemy on both sides simultaneously from a position of weakness or strike twice, which would waste his entire offensive power. Yet Wekesa still allowed them to pour sorcery into the sea. He had to make every strike count, to letting them get to the point of no return would be more efficient. Eventually he had to make a judgement call, being uncertain of the precise tipping point. Closing his eyes, Warlock shaped the power and released it. It came out as pure kinetic force, angled in a loose triangle and impacting the sea with all the strength he could put out. The dark-skinned man sighed as he opened his eyes and witnessed his work. It would have worked better as a Trismegistan formula, he had to admit. Still, even in this manner the strike was massive enough to begin a tidal wave and send it tumbling towards the Ashuran fleet. While the wave hid the enemy from his sight there must have been panic when the enemy mages realized they had to abandon their ritual after investing so heavily in it.

The backlash ought to kill more than a few.

"Something's wrong," Tikoloshe murmured.

Warlock's brow rose. It was true the enemy were slow on the answer, but that could simply be the result of their mages fearing the backlash. And yet... He adjusted one of the scrying panels. Was part of the Ashuran fleet missing?

"They went into it," he realized. "Underwater."

Absurd, unless... The tidal wave slowed. Stopped to a standstill. And then it *turned around*.

"Merciless Gods," Wekesa murmured. "Have they been using only half their mages this whole time?"

If that were true they wouldn't be simple hundreds, they would be thousands. There shouldn't be that many mages in the whole of Ashur.

"That's a repurpose of structure, Wekesa," his husband said. "Slow and horribly sloppy – they brute forced it, I'd wager – but it is. Which they shouldn't be able to do."

Sabrathan sorcery wouldn't be able to handle a ritual that delicate and abstract, the mages would start losing control halfway through.

"Jaquinite," he said. "That was Jaquinite sorcery. They have *Procerans* with them."

Hells and Damnation. The Principate's mages might be backwoods savages, but they were a lot more flexible than the Ashurans. The scope of rituals available to the opposition hadn't just doubled, it was... Hard to calculate, and there were more pressing matters.

"They want to tear down the Maze," Warlock hissed. "And get ships through to assault the remains from both sides."

Which he could not allow, not when his son was in the middle. The wards around Masego should allow him to survive the tidal wave, but he'd be out there alone and surrounded. He reached for the second pool of power without hesitation. There was no time for subtlety: he made a wall of force and smashed it into the waters. The backlash had him flinching, and he felt his nose start bleeding. Fuck. The mages keeping the wave going weren't powerful, but they were *many.* Slowly, his grip on the sorcery began to slip. It'd break, and then...

"**Link**," he croaked out, blood in his mouth.

The relief was almost immediate. Thalassina had old wards anchored around it, and linking them to his working had taken the pressure off his will. The city itself groaned, parts of its walls shattering, but his workaround succeeded. While he no longer had control of the power he'd released, he did control the connection his aspect had forged. It was only cut when the tidal wave broke and collapsed back into the sea, and Warlock let out a long breath.

"My turn," the Sovereign of Red Skies hissed.

He took a third pool of power in hand and let another aspect loose. Ships had been shattered and the Ashuran fleet put in disarray, and that was close enough for his purposes. **Imbricate** shivered across the length of Creation as he matched the sea to the nine-hundredth and thirty-third hell: the sea of blood. The waters began to turn red, bubbling and rising to a boil. It would not be long before the acidity began eating at the hulls. Halos of light bloomed over the ships, one after another. Tikoloshe shivered.

"Speakers," the incubus murmured.

They were not fighting him, Warlock noted. The imbrication was proceeding without being hindered, and the ships were not unharmed. No, it felt like something else. A prayer? *A call*, he thought. Slowly, something answered. He saw it in his mind's eye. It was not a face, it was too featureless for that. Of what it was made he could not tell, but the glare was blinding. Flesh smoking, Wekesa bared his teeth. He would not bow to priestly meddling. If some entity

had come to trouble him, it best be prepared for the consequences. The imbrication he took in hand, abandoning the fleet, and lashed around the not-face.

"Come on, you wretched thing," Warlock grinned nastily. "Let's see how you fare on my own grounds."

It sunk into the depths, the radiance slowly drowned by the sea of blood, and he laughed. Laughed until it evaporated in a storm of blood mist, the thing full and untouched. Not a face, he thought again. It was a mask. Heartbreakingly, impossibly perfect. He looked upon the visage of a god, and that god spoke.

BEGONE.

His bones creaked, his eyes burned and his teeth shattered. His husband was speaking but his ears were ringing. Blinding light came again, not of the creature's making. He'd lost control of the last pool of power and it had gone wild, raw sorcery devouring all near it and shattering the ground. The mask's lips opened to speak once more, a great weight settling on his shoulders.

"Shut up," Hierophant said.

The thing rocked back.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," Hierophant sang, thrumming with power. "Four cardinals, one meridian."

The pressure vanished and Warlock came back to himself. Through the panel he saw a mask of Light in the sky above the Maze, a terrible radiance surrounding his son. Masego stood alone on his spit of rock, black robes fluttering as he raised his palms. The warded corals around him began melting like snow in summer sun.

"The wheel unbroken, spokes are that not," Hierophant said, voice resounding across the waters. "Thou shall not leave the circle."

Wekesa closed his eyes just in time. It'd been only the smallest possible sliver of attention from Above, he realized. It could not be bound, not truly. But the attempted binding had forced it to retreat, and it had made its displeasure known beforehand. It had swatted down his son, shattered the coral and the wards alike. He was in the sea now, floating. Still alive. Warlock tried to rise but could not.

He was dying, and the Ashuran fleet advanced.

"No," he got out. "Not like this. Not my son."

Tikoloshe held him up, but his husband could not heal.

"I've paid my dues," Warlock hissed. "A lifetime carrying the banner. I am owed. I am owed, *do you hear me*?"

It came like a whisper, slithering across his body. Taking away the pain, leaving dull absence behind.

Below listened.

Below remembered, and paid the debt back in full.

Wekesa stood and knew what he must do. He'd been shown. A gurgled word had rows of runes appearing in the air, the most sophisticated binding on Creation, and with fingers like claws he ripped through them. Scattered the runes, broke the contract beyond repair.

"Wekesa?" his husband said.

"Go, Tikoloshe," he said. "Run. Return home."

His husband's face, so handsome and untouched by time even after all these years, creased in a frown.

"No," the incubus said.

"It will kill you," Wekesa whispered. "It can't. I can't let it. There has never been a devil like you. There may never be again. You are *unique*."

"So are you," Tikoloshe said. "So is he."

"Run," Warlock snarled. "I *order* you."

He laughed.

"And yet here I am," the devil said. "I have been myself for a very long time, 'Kesa."

"Don't waste it," he implored. "After you're dispersed. . . "

"What comes back will not be me," Tikoloshe softly agreed. "A blank slate. Tabula rasa."

The incubus looked up at the sky.

"I decide this," he said, tone full of wonder. "Of my own free will."

His smile was blinding as the sun.

"Isn't that something?" Tikoloshe murmured.

Wekesa could feel it thinning in his fingers with every passing heartbeat. It would not be granted to him twice. And yet all he could look at was his husband's eyes.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," Tikoloshe replied, and threaded their fingers together.

Wekesa looked up at the sun and breathed out. He thought of the others, suddenly. *Sorry, old friends. I'll be going on ahead, so it'll be up to you to snuff the candles on your way out. I'll be waiting with Sabah.*He reached out for it then, what they'd shown him. The barest glimpse of the godhead, but oh so gloriously full.

"**Reflect**," he whispered.

For a moment, for an eternity, Wekesa was unto a god.

He snapped his fingers and the world broke.

—

Hierophant woke up among a sea of corpses and driftwood.

He screamed, but did not flinch.

Chapter 68

Poised

> "Obviously you can't kill me now: your enmity is with the Dread Emperor of Praes, and I've already abdicated. I am now but a humble shoemaker, and what kind of hero slays a shoemaker?"
>
> Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful. Later noted to have made surprisingly nice shoes during his three abdications.

"So is there, like, a branch of sorcery all about lakes?" I mused. "Because if I'm going to keep using variations on the same trick it feels like there should be."

Akua's brow arched, expressing a monologue's worth of disdain without her speaking a single word.

"Lakeomancy," I suggested. "Catherine Foundling, foremost lakeomancer of her age. I could get a stele done like the old emperors – you know, basically a whole monument's worth of bragging."

"It would be lacusomancy," Diabolist sighed. "And there is no such thing. Even hydromancy is not a true discipline, properly speaking. Like most physical effects it falls under the broader aegis of manifestation."

"That just means we're pioneers, Akua," I grinned. "Look at us, bravely exploring the many ways you can steal, drop or otherwise move lakes."

"Stolen is something of a misnomer," the shade noted, looking down. "We've only borrowed it, practically speaking."

Well, she wasn't wrong. Great Strycht had proved as much of a wonder as Great Lotow, in its own way. It was, well, the easiest way to put it was that it'd been a port. Not unlike Mercantis the city had been raised on a large island, though instead of a river it'd been a lake that surrounded it. A lake that was about as large as half of Daoine, which was rather impressive. Useful, too. It hadn't been this large originally: the basin had been artificially deepened and broadened before tributary rivers were dug into the stone to feed it. Tunnels and waterfalls, some coming from underground sources but others from the surface peaks of the Everdark. Lake Strycht was the freshwater source for

an entire third of the inner ring, feeding a complex array of canals and sluice gates that were constantly fought over by sigils. The city itself was a bloody mess – scraps between sigils had sunk entire chunks of what'd once been a single island, leaving some sort of demented urban archipelago instead – but it was full of old sigils and would have been horridly difficult to assault. Drow ships were pretty much either rafts or small woven reed boats relying on oars. We'd seized a few, but it would have taken weeks of constant back and forth to get even a small army across.

Besides, the good people of Strycht had made it clear that we were not only unwelcome but currently at the top of their 'murder and harvest' list. I'd sent a few of my lords – the Peerage, Akua had taken to calling them, and the name had kept – to make polite inquiries about holding a council to discuss the dwarven threat and the cabal founded to answer it. They'd, uh, not taken well to that. Long story short, Soln and its fellows had harvested a few Mighty in a spurt of traditional drow diplomacy before making a tactical retreat back. They'd made enough of an impression that all seven cabals dedicated to maintaining control of the waterways had been called upon. Strycht was going to be swimming in old monsters before the month was out, and until then they'd taken to raiding my sigil's camps on the shore. The damage had been limited and we'd mostly come out on top due to sheer numbers and Winter fuckery, but after the initial probes they'd identified the weaknesses in our defences and begun concentrating on those. My sigil had taken the Hylian ways out of Lotow after stripping it clean of everything remotely food-adjacent and absorbed another six sigils on its way to Strycht, but while it'd massively swelled it was still a far cry from a real army. It was a confederation of tribes, if anything, bound to me by oaths and fear. Not exactly the kind of troops used to maintaining proper watch rosters and fielding patrols. So with the situation steadily worsening and the opposition refusing to talk, I'd decided a rebuttal was in order.

So I'd confiscated Lake Strycht.

It'd taken about two days to empty most of the basin even with two gates as large as we could make them. Taking every last drop had proved impossible: the tributaries kept feeding it and the basin wasn't even so there'd been pockets of water remaining. Still, in my estimating about nine tenths of the initial lake had been shunted off into Arcadia. What had once been water was now a stinking marsh of mud clogged with drying weeds and fish. It was a good thing we'd never attempted a crossing, because when the lake ebbed low some creatures were revealed that even Praesi would flinch at. Some kind of massive oily octopi with barbed tentacles, blind pale lizards the size of houses and long eels with an inexplicable amount of teeth. Most the monsters had gone through the gates, those that didn't either settling in the larger puddles or going wild as they died stripped of water. It'd been a display of power meant for the recalcitrant inside the city, now perched atop hills or small plateaus surrounded by mud, but it'd also been a form of diplomatic pressure. I'd just killed half a dozen rivers crucial to keeping an entire chunk of the inner ring from going thirsty

and done a great deal more damage to Strycht itself.

That lake had been their granary. They lived off the creatures swimming in it, of the weeds and plants now dying for lack of irrigation. The city's drow had wells and cisterns, but the population here was easily triple of Great Lotow. They'd beginning running out soon, and after that they'd be forced to sally out for puddle water with my Peerage waiting in ambush. The Mighty would be able to stick it out until reinforcements arrived, sure, but what about the rest? Nine tenths of their people were going start withering on the vine. Even if the cabals proved victorious against me in a few weeks, sigil-holders would lose most their sigils to thirst. And they had to know that even if they got my head on a pike, there'd been no guarantee of getting the lake back. How many years would it be until the tributaries filled back even half of Lake Strycht? So I'd sent a handful of my Peerage forward again, to revisit the subject of a council. I'd instructed Ivah to make it clear that if they really pushed me they might just get the lake back directly on top their heads, which ought to make at least a few of them reconsider. Once we had a foothold in the city, well, if the rest dug their heels in I wasn't above ordering an assault. I'd glimpsed what my Peerage was capable of, during our passage through the ways.

I was glad of the oaths, because I wasn't sure I could win the fight if it ever came to that.

"I don't know about borrowed," I said. "I'm considering keeping the lake, or at least a portion of it."

The slight shift in Akua's stance indicated surprise, though I knew better than to think she hadn't allowed it consciously.

"There is no lack of usable geographic features in Arcadia," Diabolist said. "Archer has brought forward the interesting notion of-"

"Yes, Indrani wants me to start dropping mountains," I sighed. "I'm well aware."

"There are also volcanoes in what was once Summer," the shade reminded me. "Actually triggering an eruption when we need it would be significantly more difficult, but not outright impossible."

"There's basically everything in Arcadia, if you look long enough," I grunted. "That's not why I'm thinking of redeploying the lake."

"Decoration?" Akua drily suggested. "I suppose it's never too late to acquire taste, though I must warn you 'monster-infested underground lake' is rather *passé*. Very sixth century."

Ugh, and she probably thought she was actually funny.

"Well," I brightly replied, "as the foremost lakeomancer of my generation-"

"There is no such thing," Diabolist insisted.

"- it occurs to me I've been mostly, um, dropping large bodies of water on people," I said. "For tactical purposes."

"As one does," Akua agreed.

"It seems like a very narrow use of the ability," I said. "When I have an entire region of Callow that, between you and Summer, was effectively ravaged."

Scarlet eyes narrowed.

"You want to move the lake to Callow," she said.

"I'd have to consult governors and landowners," I noted. "And someone familiar with farming practices. But it occurs to me that Summer-torched land might benefit from fresh irrigation. Hells, there might even be enough fish left for actual fishing."

"And you want to use a lake born of Creation. because moving an Arcadian body of water might very well have... unforeseen consequences," Akua murmured. "Wise."

I passed a hand through my hair.

"Look, there's so many problems I can't solve with killing," I said. "So it might be time to consider other solutions. One of the reasons Praes has been such a murderous shitshow play of correspondingly shitty and murderous thespians is that the Wasteland is exactly as termed. If I take a lake from somewhere else and sell it to whoever's holding the Tower, it could tip the balance the other way. The Empire wouldn't start starving its way into an invasion every other decade."

Horrifyingly enough, Diabolist was *beaming*.

"You want to steal pieces of Creation and auction them off to nations," she said. "Dearest, this might be the first of your designs I can say I wholeheartedly endorse."

"It's not stealing," I protested. "You can't *own* a lake. I mean, legally yes and nobody better take mine, but when you think about it in a religious sense-"

"You are preaching to the choir, my heart," Akua intervened. "Admittedly the choir is made of damned souls, but let us not pretend talented singers are usually headed for the Heavens."

"Why am I talking to you about this?" I muttered. "Of course you'd be on board, this is basically Dread Empress Sinistra's plan only with riches instead of hero-delivered death at the end."

"It could be useful to mark some mountain peaks rich in ore, when we return to the surface," Diabolist suggested. "Mercantis would pay a fortune for access to mines where there can be no dwarven claim. And Callow itself is famously poor in precious metals: acquiring a source of mintage would be quite useful."

The worse part was that it wasn't actually a bad idea. Gods knew my kingdom could use the coin and the mines both. What I hated most about Akua was how useful she could be when she put her mind to it, which was always.

"Something to consider in the future," I said.

She studied me carefully.

"There is more," she noted.

"Someone broke one of my cities last year," I frostily replied.

"And so you have hordes of refugees in need of shelter," Diabolist said, delicately avoiding the subject. "As well a myriad of standing structures about to be permanently vacated."

Not to mention a treasury that'd effectively be a glorified war chest and granary until the Tenth Crusade ended, which meant no funds for the kind of reconstruction that southern Callow badly needed. Hakram had produced miracles in keeping the tent cities clothed and fed, but come winter things were going to get ugly. The Waning Woods were too far, and absurdly dangerous to take lumber from if you went any deeper than the very outskirts. I'd seen it coming, of course, and we'd set aside wood and coal for fires, but it wouldn't last all the way through the cold season. And Great Strycht was now a pack of very nice stone districts set atop hills and plateaus, many of which would fit inside a gate. It'd be tricky to get them through without wrecking them, of course, but not impossible. And even ruins would make great building materials, if worse came to worse. There'd be more cities ahead, too. I'd be leading the drow to the surface and until I could settle them where I wanted them to be there'd be a need for something to host them, but it didn't *all* have to be used for that.

It was a little ironic that I'd waited until Thief was gone to start thinking about stealing cities.

"There is merit to the notion," Akua said. "And though you now seem intent on civilian use, there is another side to the coin. If you can take a fortress. . . "

I could just leave it in Arcadia for later, then plop it out as field fortifications while on campaign. Near instantly. Juniper might just forget to hate Diabolist to the bone for a few heartbeats, if she heard about this.

"They're not heavy on fortifications so far," I said. "I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"We've not yet penetrated deep into the inner ring," she replied. "There may yet be opportunity."

I didn't disagree. If I could get my hands on even just a fort, it'd be a nasty surprise to pull on my foes down the line. Field battles against the Dead King would be a chancy gamble even if the entire Grand Alliance was mobilized, this kind of sudden upset might be able to turn the tide. The first time it was used, at least. Neshamah wasn't the kind of enemy that'd fall for the same trick twice. We stood there for some time in silence, the mood shifting as the conversation ebbed. The sight of the cavern before us wasn't something a few days could get me used to, I silently admitted. The sheer *size* of it was staggering. It had the length and breadth of a province, the walls so distant even my eyes found them hard to discern, but the ceiling was what awe me every time. It was uneven, betraying that this was no singular cave but hundreds of them carved into a single place by what must have been decades of hard labour. I'd never seen anything taller save for the Tower itself, and the Tower was millennia of Praesi madness made into edifice. What kind of people had the ancient drow been, to make this?

What had broken them so deeply they'd become a pack of rats scavenging their own ruins?

"Not even Keter is match for it in scope," Akua softly said, gaze following mine. "Fitting, I suppose. The Crown of the Dead is a mere gate to the Dead

King's true realm, impressive as it is. This must have been one of the beating hearts of their empire."

"Don't you have a bureaucracy to run?" I said.

"Subordinates must be assessed," she replied. "At my behest you granted Centon much power. If it proves incapable of discharging its duties without my constant supervision, replacement must be found."

And by that we both knew she meant Centon would be harvested and another drow raised in its place. Not killed, I'd set down rules about that, but Night could be taken without killing. The disgrace would probably cut deeper than death, though. Ivah certainly hated speaking of how it'd come to have that name in the first place. It was cold-blooded of Diabolist, but then I expected nothing less from her. Your average Wasteland aristocrat made lizards look warm in comparison, and Akua Sahelian had remained on top of that pack for years.

"Sometimes I wonder what it takes to make someone like you," I said. "But then I remember all I heard about your mother, and I stop wondering."

Her lips quirked.

"And what exactly did you hear, dearest?" she asked.

"Black called her brilliant," I said. "Said that she'd managed to survive Malicia's rise while supporting her enemies with little loss of influence. He was wary of her."

"High praise, coming from the Carrion Lord," Akua noted. "Mother was a creature of nuances."

"You must have hated her," I said. "That story you told me about your friend. No child should have to live through that. Not even you."

"I suppose I did," the shade murmured. "But not in the way you mean. You – your people – marry personal hatreds with your actions in a way we are taught not to."

"Praesi keep grudges too, Akua," I said. "Take revenge. There's an entire hall of screaming heads in the Tower speaking to the truth of that."

"I do no explain myself well, I think," Diabolist said. "I was raised to treat Akua Sahelian and the heiress to Wolof as different persons. I could hate, and take revenge, as the first. The second must be a creature suborned only to ambition. Those among my people who do not learn to separate one face from the other die young."

"That's absurd to me," I admitted. "I can understand necessity dictating your actions. I leapt down that slope years ago. But you can't just pretend it's two different people, Akua. It's still you. Your actions. I didn't somehow fight the Diabolist and spare you. It's all on your head, like it's all on mine."

"Perhaps in Callow that is true," she mused. "But in the Wasteland? We must clasp hands with those who've slain our kin, stabbed our predecessors in the back, stolen riches and appointments. It is a necessary distinction, Catherine. We can make sport of each other, so long as it is that. We would all lose for the stripping of that veil."

"Then shouldn't you?" I said. "Lose, I mean. Your entire philosophy is that conflict breeds strength, yet I can't call what you describe anything but fragile."

She quietly laughed.

"How harsh a judgement you cast on my people," she said. "Will you hold all others to the same standard? The severe Ashurans, strangling their own kind with a rope of rules and tiers. The quarrelsome Procerans, who war with all under the sun out of hungry ambition. And even your own, Catherine. How many teeth-clenching grudges has Callow followed to dark endings?"

"None of the others wound Creation bartering for power," I said. "Or bleed thousands upon thousands in rituals. I have axes to grind with my enemies, Akua, but I know what they are. Where their limits lie."

"Then the issue is of means, not philosophy," Diabolist said. "And so for the greatest monster of all, you need look no further than your teacher. What *limits* does the Carrion Lord have?"

"And he, too, will be held to account," I quietly said. "For what he has done and may yet do."

"Ah," Akua smiled. "And are these the words of Catherine Foundling or the Black Queen?"

"That's my entire point," I said. "They're the same person. That's what responsibility means."

"And mine is that your decisions will always be a choice," Diabolist said. "Between what the woman wants and what the queen requires."

I waved a hand dismissively, tired of the argument. Her logic only held up because it was a closed circle.

"But since you asked," Akua said, looking at the distant city. "I despised my mother. For what she did. For what she wanted from me. But it was Tasia Sahelian that was my enemy, and her I admired until the day she lost."

"Because she was brilliant," I said.

"Because she was everything I was taught to want," she mused. "Powerful and cunning and every bit the match of our Empress."

"Until she lost," I said.

"I severed our relations before I could be dragged down with her," Akua said. "But I would not call that revenge. It was not a matter between us but between the Diabolist and the High Lady of Wolof."

"And do you regret it?" I asked. "Leaving her behind."

I wasn't sure, I thought, what I was looking for. Humanity, maybe. Some speck of a person who had more to her than Wasteland iron and villainy. But what would I even do with it, if it was found? There was no saving someone like Akua, and I did not want to try. A hundred thousand souls demanded otherwise. The shade's face was distant, lost in her thoughts.

"I do," Diabolist finally said. "What a strange thing that is."

"She was a lot of things," I said. "But your mother was one of them."

"She was," Akua Sahelian agreed.

Her lips quirked.

"I should have killed her myself, mother to daughter."

Chapter 69

Peerage

> "Traitorous's Law: while redemption is the greatest victory one can achieve over a villain, to function it does require the villain to have at least a single redeemable quality.
> Addendum: Yes, even if a Choir is involved."

Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

Some days I wondered what it said about me that I much preferred holding court down in the Everdark than back in Laure. Sure, odds were good that every single member of my Peerage – even Ivah – would turn on me in a heartbeat if their oaths allowed for it, but for all that there was a simplicity to the proceedings that I enjoyed. Callow's royalty was known for a certain lack of pageantry compared to its much wealthier neighbours to the east and the west, but even that relative lack of ceremony could feel stifling at times. I'd spent most of my times prior to the crowning on one campaign or another, and while it was true that the Legions were strictly regulated I'd had the benefit of being a Named in a Praesi institution. Which had meant, more or less, that rules had only ever applied to me if someone higher in the Empire's pecking order had decreed that they did. Considering Black had been the very definition of hands off and Malicia had largely considered me his problem early on, I'd been allowed to run free.

It might have been for the better if I hadn't. I'd learned a lot from my teacher but in many ways my apprenticeship felt only half-finished. Though I had long disdained the kind of aristocratic someone like Akua brought to the table, I'd since felt the costs of lacking that kind of education. Dealing with Wastelanders and Procerans I'd often been on the backfoot while they turned etiquette and custom into armaments. Much as I hated to admit it, treating with Cordelia Hasenbach without Diabolist whispering in my ear all the while would have seen the First Prince playing me like a fiddle. She'd called me a warlord, in one of our little talks, and she had a point. On the surface that was a stone around my neck, but down here? It was the wind in my sail. I was

dealing with other warlords, and even before I'd stolen Crepuscular from Akua's mind I'd known how to speak the language of these people. Seated comfortably on a stone bench perched atop an inclined that less-than-subtly set my Peerage below me, I struck a match against my sleeve and lit my pipe.

My wakeleaf stash was running low, so I'd had to ration the vice, but there was no point in letting the herbs go to waste. I puffed at the sculpted dragonbone shaft, inhaling the smoke and letting it stream out of my nostrils with a pleased sigh. It was gladdening that Winter had not stripped me of all my petty pleasures.

"Evening," I drawled. "I see none of you are missing, so I'll take it that negotiations didn't go too badly."

My court of murderers offered up polite amusement at the admittedly weak jest. The Peerage now numbered eleven Mighty, every single one titled by Winter. Most of those had come from Great Lotow, reluctantly bending the knee after wandering around the outskirts of Arcadia for a while and finding no way out save the one I'd offered. Slaus and Sagas had been the first to fold, remaining where I'd left them and taking the oaths after a single day. The others trickled into my service over the following week as my sigil settled our other affairs in the city. Nodoi and Vasyl had held out for three and five days, respectively, finding no trouble living off the land but no way back to the Everdark either. By then I'd already bullied Losle and Zarkan into oath-taking after a few demonstrations of how dangerous living in places with only one entrance and exit could be when that space could be closed off by gate. Kanya and Soln had refused the longest, the full seven days, and they'd only changed their minds after Mighty Orelik vanished without a trace. Sooner or later, those treading the domain of the fae were found by them. Including Ivah, I'd left Great Lotow with nine titled lords. The last two we'd picked up on our way to Great Strycht, the sigil-holders of the Lovre and the Vadimyr.

Practically speaking, those sigils had been roving bandits and raiders living off whatever they could take from the weakest nearby territory. They'd had almost no supplies to throw into the pot, which had been something of an issue, but the sigils were also the most battle-hardened I had at my disposal. They'd had as many dzulu as nisi in their ranks, and according to Akua they were the tribes finding it easiest to live under my rules. It made sense to me: with low numbers, they simply hadn't been able to afford the casual cruelties of larger and more established sigils. The other sigil-holders we'd come across on our way to Strycht had been less inclined to bend the knee when presented with overwhelming numbers, so they'd ended up feeding my nascent Peerage instead of joining it. Their lesser Mighty and dzulu had not been so obstinate, so they'd been folded into my own Losara Sigil where Ivah could keep an eye on them. It'd had the added benefit of swelling what could be considered my personal tribe larger than any of the others, always a good card to have in hand when dealing with other warlords.

"Reports, then," I said. "Lord Soln?"

The Lord of Shallow Graves smiled, which was promising. I'd been careful not to play favourites with my Peerage, but I would privately admit that Soln was the Mighty who'd most grown on me. It had taken to its title better than any drow save Ivah, and its continued knack for producing results was a very large feather in its metaphorical cap.

"Talks with the Jindrich have been fruitful, Losara Queen," it announced. "Mighty Jindrich is willing to take the oaths, in exchange for certain considerations."

I puffed at my pipe, impressed but trying not to show it. The Jindrich weren't top dog back in Strycht, but they were widely considered the runner-up to the sigil that was. In large part because Jindrich itself was apparently a fucking terrifying savage that went berserk when fighting other Mighty and sunk entire chunks of island in the throes of uncontrollable rage. I'd expected them to be holdouts, not in the first batch of collaborators. Letting out a stream of acrid smoke, I let out a pleased hum.

"Considerations?" I prompted.

"Jindrich territory holds the largest cisterns of Great Strycht," Lord Soln elaborated. "This is well-known. They would outlast all others when thirst takes the city, and so cabal was forged among lesser sigils to take the water from them by force. Mighty Jindrich requests assistance in scattering the scavengers before oaths are taken."

Ah, these charming drow. You could always count on them to turn on each other even when the enemy was at the gate.

"And Jindrich will fight at our side, when the time comes?" I asked.

"That is so, Losara Queen," Lord Soln replied.

"Then the bargain is struck," I said. "Centon?"

Akua's secretary had been standing in my shadow all the while, stone tablet and chalk in hand, and approached when bid.

"My queen," it murmured.

"Add five auction seats to the due of the Soln," I ordered.

The auction system had not lasted long before needing revision, though we'd never expected it would. Considering we now had almost forty thousand drow on the march, allowing everyone to bid would have been difficult. The simple logistical difficulties of fitting that many people in a single cavern aside, I'd needed a carrot to keep my growing army happy. Oaths bound them regardless of preference, but willing soldiers tended to be a lot more useful than conscripts. The right to attend the auction of Night-filled corpses was now restricted to a smaller number of people, currently four hundred. My own Losara Sigil owned a quarter of that, most of it attributed by lottery so more than dzulu and Mighty might rise, but I'd given every sigil under my banner a certain number of seats and kept the last hundred as rewards to parcel out. Lord Soln would have the right to grant those seats to whoever it wished, both reinforcing its authority over its sigil and giving a reminder that the power's ultimate source was the Queen of Lost and Found.

Diabolist might be a bloody viper but there was no denying how gods-damned *useful* she was.

"Honour was given," Lord Soln said, inclining its head.

"The worthy rise," I replied, the cadenced sentence in Crepuscular rolling off the tongue.

My gaze swept over the rest of the Peerage, and I could almost taste the anger and envy some displayed. *But not directed at me*, I thought. *Not for now, anyway.* It was an ugly little bit of irony that some of the Praesi practices I despised the most worked so well with the drow. Keeping the blades of my subordinates pointed at each other was an old Wasteland game I was beginning to be a fair hand at. *But they will not fight each other*, I reminded myself. *The oaths have seen to that.* The violence would be turned outwards, and put to my purposes.

"I await other fair news," I said. "Lord Vadimyr?"

The most recent addition to the Peerage shook its head. Vadimyr had actually answered a few questions I had about drow and the nature of the titles I was handing out without meaning to. The Lord of Fading Echoes was, well, the owner of a womb. It had risen to prominence late, and birthed a child when it was nisi. I did not choose the titles I gave out when empowering my lords – Winter provided them – so it'd been interesting to learn that my mantle would likely never hand out a title of Lady to a drow. A matter of perception by the beholden, Akua had theorized, and in Masego's absence I had no reason to gainsay her.

"Mighty Karmel founded a cabal with three others to share their water," Lord Vadimyr said. "Together they may well last until the great cabals of the inner ring come to war against us, and so will not consider the taking of oaths."

I nodded.

"Lord Slaus?" I tried.

"The fortune of Mighty Soln was my own curse," the drow ruefully admitted. "For the Hushu are of the cabal besieging the Jindrich, and so have undertaken salvation by strife. They deny any other ending."

Yeah, there were two sides to that coin. For every cornered sigil they'd be twice as many sigils cornering it, and those would be less than inclined to make a pact with an interloper like me. I suspected that if I allowed the internal skirmishes to play out I'd get a willing accomplice out of every major defeat, but I had constraints of my own to consider. My own camp might be fine when it came to water – I *did* have a lake to parcel out – but food was another story. I had over forty thousand drow to keep fed nowadays, and no supply train to speak of. Considering I'd refused foraging raids in favour of assimilating the same sigils we'd be pillaging, the state of our food reserves was essentially a downwards slope with the occasional uptick when we brought in a sigil. Of course that same sigil also brought additional bellies to fill, so the relief was short-lived and followed by even sharper descent. We had maybe another two

weeks left in us before emergency rationing started, and after that *maybe* a third before the stores ran empty.

There'd been cattle in Great Lotow, great lizards and some sort of giant moles whose milk Indrani assured me was utterly disgusting, but Lotow was an outskirts city. The wealthy sigils with full stores were further in, and meanwhile we'd already butchered most of the lizards for meat. Several times, actually. The younger ones were smaller but they grew back body parts over several days as long as they didn't lose too much flesh and die from the effort, which had strung out their use some. Strictly speaking I could afford a week of sitting on my thumbs before matters became urgent but it would be risky. We'd have to take Strycht and its entire stores immediately afterwards or risk circling the drain of our personal reserves while hammering down the last pockets of resistance. Archer had half-seriously noted that since corpses were currently our most common form of loot perhaps grey meat should be put on the table, but cannibalism was a little too far for me. Akua had noted that it was strictly taboo in drow culture regardless, as eating their own kind's flesh was believed to cause rot in the soul and cause Night to seep out.

No, in my eyes were needed to take Great Strycht within the next few days. It'd give us enough of a margin that we'd keep our head above the water while resuming our march into the inner ring, racing ever more harshly against the bottom as we went. It wasn't sustainable, but then it didn't have to be: this was an exodus, not a conquest. Unfortunately that meant attacking soon, and that would be risky business without allies on the inside. Which proved to be in rather short supply, I discovered as the Peerage continued giving me their reports. There were a few offers to help against other sigils but not take oaths, in exchange for water, but the lords who'd held those talks admitted betrayal was more than likely the moment water was supplied. Lord Zarkan, who'd yet to bother hiding how much it despise my very existence, brought a second success with a minor sigil that'd apparently been evicted of its territory by a cabal and was now furious enough to turn its cloak. Five auction seats went to the Zarkan for the success, though that one did not thank me for them afterwards. Lord Nodoi had failed in talks with the Strycht sigil it'd approached but found another settled near the western sluice gate that was desperate enough to take the full oaths in exchange for survival. They were already on their way, and for that the Nodoi earned six seats.

It was Ivah's own report that turned the mood grim, for it'd been sent not to bargain but to gain information.

"Over the last two days I took five Mighty from varying sigils," the Lord of Silent Steps informed me. "As of an hour ago interrogation of four of them has been carried out. From this, two matters of import were discovered. The first is that we have drawn the attention of the Longstride Cabal."

The drow were always eerily well-behaved, at least when I was present, so there was no ripple of murmurs as there would have been with humans. But several of the lords visibly stiffened, which for their kind was a glaring warning

sign.

"This is certain?" Lord Vasyl pressed.

"Mighty Leslaw is of the Swooping Bat Cabal, of which a lesser member of the Longstride is also part," Ivah said. "It is my understanding that is the path by which word of our arrival spread. When the cabals of Great Strycht put out the call to war, interest developed."

"You'll have to fill me in on the particulars of this Longstride Cabal," I said.

Ivah grimaced.

"Hunters of hunters, my queen," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "A great and ancient cabal."

Lord Soln nodded, catching my eye.

"They fight only for the glory of the Night," it added. "Only the sharpest blades are invited into the fold. They hold no territory, protect no temple: their only purpose is the death of those they deem worthy."

So not so much dwarven deed-seekers as a bunch of Night-powered Ranger equivalents. That was just lovely.

"How many?" I asked.

"Two hundred," Ivah said. "Never more nor less. One invited must take another's place."

By which it meant murder their predecessor. So I wasn't just dealing with thrill-killers, I was dealing with a full cohort of hardened Mighty who'd either been dangerous enough to kill one of the old monsters or remained sharp enough to kill the young ones.

"How long before they're mobilized?" I asked. "If they're this picky about members, they have to be widely spread out."

"It is hard to say, Losara Queen," Lord Lovre told me. "For while they range far and wide, there are those among them who know the Secret of shadow-striding. That is the source of their name."

"Shadow-striding," I slowly repeated. "Is that what I think it is?"

The drow sharply grinned.

"Wherever there is shadow, their strides may take them," Lord Lovre agreed. "It is a gift from the very hands of Sve Noc."

"And this is instantaneous," I said, disbelieving.

That sounded like teleportation through shadows, which was a bit much even if the Priestess of Night had her fingers in it. Even the Miezans had to sacrifice a city's worth of captives to move their armies like that. *Masego* couldn't fucking teleport, and I'd seen him order a Princess of Summer to go sit in the corner like a petulant child.

"Not so," Lord Soln said. "It is a lengthening of stride. Not unlike the stories Mighty Archer speaks of your journeys in the Garden of the Splendid."

So cutting corners, not snap-your-fingers-and-it's-done. If the Gloom and the Night were really part of Sve Noc's domain, as I'd come to suspect they were, shadow-striding might just be taking a shortcut through the original domain from which all the rest spawned. Or it might just be an improvement on

the shadow-tendril trick almost every drow with Night could use, only with a difficult relationship with its father and something to prove. Regardless, that meant we were about to be up in our neck in veteran old guard killers.

"A week?" I tried.

"Less," Ivah said. "My captive had no precise day, yet believed they would arrive before assault was made on Great Strycht."

"They don't know when we're going to assault," I pointed out.

"Speculation abounds," my Lord of Silent Steps drily said. "Most common is the belief that within five days there will be battle."

"So four days," I frowned. "Give or take."

This was starting to take shape, slowly but surely. This would be fought in waves. My army had to strike within a few days. The Longstride Cabal would arrive within four to hunt us for sport. The earliest reinforcements from the inner ring cabals would start arriving within a week. If I took Great Strycht before the Longstride arrived, I could lay an ambush for them. Which would pay off massively, if I could title even a few of those drow. The shadow-striding trick would allow us to spread exponentially fast, and we'd be able to eat up the reinforcements as they arrived. That would be a tipping point for this campaign, I thought. If I had a Peerage that large and powerful? We'd trample everything in our way towards Sve Noc, swelling with recruits as we did. On the other hand, if we botched the invasion of Strycht we were fucked for good. We'd lose strength in the attempt, and then we'd get hit by the Longstride and the reinforcements in quick succession. It had downwards spiral written all over it. Bold strokes would either win this or end this, depending on how it all fell out. Waiting was essentially giving up the game, and so not even worth considering.

"There is a second matter of import, Losara Queen," Ivah reminded me.

I rolled my shoulder, reluctantly emerging from my line of thought.

"I'm listening," I said.

"One of the prisoners I obtained was a jawor of the Rumena Sigil," my Lord of Silent Steps said. "Privy to intent of Mighty Rumena itself."

My brow rose. If the Jindrich were the runner-ups, then the Rumena were the local hegemons. Their sigil was twice the size of anybody else's, their rylleh were said to be a pain to even sigil-holders and Mighty Rumena itself was rumoured to have died once, gotten rather angry about it and promptly gotten up with a severed spine to smash in the head of the offending Mighty. The only drow in Strycht it was even remotely wary of was Jindrich, and there was cabal essentially every other sigil-holder was part of whose entire purpose was making sure the Rumena didn't eat everyone else. If it was making a move, it would have major consequences on how this battle unfolded.

"And?" I said.

"The many sigils of Great Strycht are turning on each other," Ivah said. "Cabals have split, or been reforged to address more pressing concerns. There is opportunity in this."

"It's preparing to take a swing at claiming all of Strycht," I said.

"Malcontent rylleh were approached, I am told," Ivah smiled. "And the jawor I took was looking for weaknesses in the defences other sigils."

I closed my eyes. This... It might work. If they struck hard and quick while other sigils were already fighting. If they kept the fighting out of sight until they'd harvested enough Night, they could just retreat for a day and let their Mighty digest what they took – after that they'd have enough power to bring to bear that even allied opposition wouldn't matter. That was an additional beat to the dance ahead, and one I could use. If I had eyes in the right place. If I was careful and fast and lucky. I opened my eyes and brought the pipe back to my lips. The fire had gone out, since I'd put talking above smoking, but there was still some wakeleaf not entirely gone to ash. I took a match out of my cloak and struck it on my arm, puffing at the pipe until it lit up again. Waste not, want less. Meeting the eyes of my Peerage, I spat out a mouthful of smoke and let it curl around my face.

"Are any of you," I smiled, "familiar with Irritant's Law?"

Chapter 70

The Calm Before

> "Own what you are, no matter how ugly the face of it. No lies are ever more dangerous to a villain than those they tell themselves."
>
> Dread Emperor Benevolent

"So this is going to be the big one, I hear," Indrani said.

It would have been inaccurate to call... this a habit. It didn't happen regularly enough for that, given the demands on our time. But once in a while, when the silent clamour of a thousand duties and foes became too much, I found there was a fire in a nook tucked away from my army and that Archer was waiting there, feet propped up and bottle in hand. Ironic in a way, that a woman who'd been raised in a place called Refuge had become so apt at providing the same. Like all of Indrani's kindnesses, the seemingly careless granting of them belied the keen perception behind their nature. I tended to think of Akua as the most skilled manipulator among us, capable of spinning exquisite lies at the merest prompt, but some days I wondered. Diabolist was known to get her way, by hook or crook, but I'd had different lessons from her. *The most useful talent is that which no one knows you have*, Black had once told me. Archer drank like a fish, was largely led by her whims and professed indifference as to much of what went on around her. The very last person, in a way, that you'd expect to nudge events the way she wanted them.

I forced the thought away. Suspicion, once entertained, was like a drop of ink in water. No matter how thinned, it would always cloud the brew. I did not have so many friends left that I could afford to start ascribing them hidden motives. The colder part of me noted that willing blindness led to dark surprises and that the duties of queenship demanded vigilance regardless of costs to myself, but for once I turned deaf ear to it. Trust had seen me through the storms so far, and though it had brought me some disappointments it had brought me wonders as well. *In this, at least, I will indulge sentiment*, I thought.

"The Battle of Great Strycht," I agreed. "It will decide the campaign, if not the outcome of our entire stroll through the Everdark."

"Sve Noc, huh," Indrani mused. "She's allowed us our fun so far, but that won't last. It's one thing to throw a rabid hound scraps when there's a bear coming, another when the hound takes a hand."

"We've observed the rules of her game," I said. "What we wield, we took."

"And that'll matter why? This entire place reeks of Below, Cat," she said, and raised a hand when I began to object. "I'm not talking about dusty shrines or red-slick altars. Not even about prayer, really. It's the way this place was made. Kill and rise, kill and fall: every single drow spends their time either clawing for power or slowly dying."

I studied her in the flickering light of the flames, the shadow cast by the twisted rock around us dancing across her face. *Halfway between tattoos and feathers*, I thought.

"You're saying it doesn't matter if they pray," I frowned. "They pay the dues regardless."

"I'm saying this entire place is a prayer," Indrani quietly said. "And we both know whose it is."

The Priestess of Night. Sve Noc. We'd not crossed paths since that last probing look at each other, but I knew she was everywhere down here. In every custom, every ritual. Maybe even every drow.

"That sounds," I murmured, "like a recipe for apotheosis."

It wasn't the first time I'd considered that, truth be told. After crossing the Gloom and realizing the Everdark was a kingdom turned towards itself, ever only sending dregs to the surface, I'd wondered as to the purpose of that. An entire civilization whose foundations had been ripped away and replaced with codified murder and infighting – what sane person would want that? It might have made sense if the entire purpose was to cultivate demigods and send them out. I'd not forgotten my fight with Mighty Urulan, how what could only be considered a second-stringer by drow standards had batted me around and come close to killing me more than once. *Me*. I could, without too much arrogance, claim that among the Named of Calernia's surface I ranked in the ten most dangerous. If the likes of Urulan had been sent to rampage across Procer or Callow, it would have been bloody mayhem. If a cohort of Mighty that powerful had gone? Half the heroes on the continent would have needed to mobilize to end them, and there'd be casualties. I could not deny that Sve Noc's orchard of killers had grown some particularly murderous peaches. But they'd never been *used*, had they?

Night could be grown from harvesting other peoples, but when had real raiding parties last troubled Calernia? Long enough ago the Everdark was just a footnote in the histories of nations, either a pointed lesson in the dangers of following Below or the subject of casual contempt from more 'successful' villains. Which was madness, because if I'd led the army I currently commanded against Diabolist at Second Liesse we would have ripped her to shreds. Hells, unless the Lone Swordsman had a very good story at his back Urulan would have torn through the poor fucker in an hour's work and gone for a drink after-

wards. But Sve Noc had never sent her apostles out of her realm, and there had to be a reason for that. At first I'd wondered if it was as simple as where the Everdark was. Surrounded on three sides by the Golden Bloom, the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead. The ratlings were arguably the weakest of those powers, but even Triumphant at her peak hadn't managed to exterminate them wholesale. *And if there's one thing out there I'd bet on against Mighty, it would be Horned Lords*, I thought. Had the Gloom and the Night been raised as a moat and garrison?

The issue with that was the dwarves. It didn't take a genius to guess that effectively surrendering the entire underground to a rival and highly expansionist power before wrecking your own capacity to wage war except through Name-imitations would have long term *consequences*. Sve Noc, assuming she really was behind all of this, had to have known the moment she put out the Gloom and Night the hourglass was flipped. The Kingdom Under would keep growing, keep expanding, and eventually they'd find a way through. At that point, well, it was only a matter of time until the drow were done. Even if they were beaten back the first time, the dwarves would keep coming with better methods and larger armies every time. Even just putting all the nisi they encountered to the sword would allow the dwarves to send their enemies into a downwards spiral while they swallowed their own losses with a shrug. Evidently Sve Noc's game had worked for a few centuries, but she'd had to know it was a delaying measure and not a solution.

But it'd make sense, wouldn't it? If the Gloom had been exactly that, a delay, and the Night was the actual solution. Centuries of willing sacrifice, swelling the invisible altar as the Priestess of Night remained cloistered in her temple and shaped her own ascension. It was one thing to fight a Named, but a god? Neshamah had called himself that, and he had broken enough crusades the claim couldn't be summarily dismissed. If I was right, if Archer was right, then there was only one question left to ask. Was she *ready*? Had the dwarves come too early, while she was still gathering her might? Or was this entire invasion a trap, the prelude to her ascension? There was no way to know, and I was not too proud to admit that scared me.

"We have no stories, down here," I finally sighed. "I am not used to missing that."

"I'm not so sure," Indrani said. "We've had our share of coincidences, haven't we?"

I cocked an eyebrow at her in silent invitation. Archer glanced at my now-empty cup and I willing offered it for filling. Drow liquor, this, called *senna*. Made from some sort of giant mushrooms and used to induce lucid dreaming when drunk in small quantities before sleep. It kicked like a mule and taste kind of like mud, but we were running out of surface booze so this was no time to get picky. The good stuff we'd want for celebration, assuming we live through this. I grimaced after knocking back half my cup. This was going to take some getting used to.

"Right, so coincidences," she said. "We ran into Ivah pretty early. Good guide, former bigwig from an inner ring sigil, full of information. That's one."

I almost objected that we'd come fairly close to killing it during our introductory skirmish, but held my tongue. Almost was the domain of coincidence, I wouldn't deny that.

"Then we snuck through between the dwarven vanguard and the main army," Indrani continued. "If we'd been ahead of the vanguard, we would have run into entrenched drow before we had their measure. If we'd trailed behind the army, there would have been no one to take. That's two."

In the first instance we also wouldn't have had the spectre of dwarven invasion to hold up as a banner when bringing in Mighty, which would have massively complicated the process. Much as I disliked what I was hearing, she had a point.

"And then when we run into the vanguard," she said. "Which happens to be run by Named dwarf who can strike a deal with you in his people's name. Three."

"For all we know that's common practice in dwarven armies," I pointed out.

She clucked her tongue.

"Fine, I'll withdraw that one," she conceded. "And replace it by 'we came into the Everdark specifically when the Kingdom Under was invading'."

I winced. Yeah, that was a little harder to argue about.

"We can get lucky too," I said.

"Sure we can," Indrani said. "Once. Twice gets suspicious. Three times is a nudge."

"We wouldn't even be down here if we'd had alternatives," I said. "Hasenbach wasn't willing to deal, Keter got turned on us and the fae would have been... costly. More than we can afford."

"Good timing, isn't it?" Archer mildly said. "Stripped from all palatable options save for the Everdark, then thrown here when shit comes to a head."

"No, I get what you're implying," I said. "We got nudged into this. I disagree because there were just too many moving parts, but even assuming you're right I don't see is what Below gains from this. If Sve Noc's getting her god on, we're the fly in the ointment. They lose a discount Dead King to what, improve my military situation? And you know where I want to settle the drow long-term, Indrani, it'd fuck up a good thing for them."

"You're still thinking with your crown, sweetcheeks," Indrani said. "Lady Ranger used to limit how many her pupils could follow her on a hunt, did you know? Not because more of us would have been a problem, most of the time we were pretty decorative."

"She made it a prize," I frowned.

"And so we fought for it," she agreed. "Kept us sharp, because there was a lot to gain from trailing her on those and nobody wanted to be left behind. Hells, Cat, you got your start in pit fights didn't you? You should be able to feel when the audience is placing bets."

I would deny her, but I still remembered the days before I'd become the Squire in full. When, even with Black's accolade, I'd still been a claimant. We'd fought for a Name bound to Below, and Below had only wanted one person left standing when the dust settled. The similarities were there.

"They still lose out," I said. "She could get her apotheosis and I could get desperate upstairs without allies. That'd be a win in their books."

"Would it?" Indrani mused. "How long has she been at this play, Cat? Long enough even the dwarves ran out of other shit to conquer. That doesn't sound like victory on the horizon to me, it sounds like somewhere somehow she fucked up. And you, well, when's the last time you had a good kneel in front of the altar?"

"Black didn't pray," I said.

"Black toppled a hero-led kingdom and spent decades smothering heroic cribs," Indrani said. "You, on the other hand? You meddle with the methods, but you're also making deals with heroes and trying alliances with crusaders. You're not exactly flag-bearer for the Hellgods."

"And *this* gets me under the banner?" I replied, skeptical.

She shrugged.

"Look, I'm not going to weep for the Everdark," she said. "It's a fucking mess of murder and slavery and if you'd decided to drown the damned place instead I would have clapped your back and called it a good day's work."

Archer paused.

"But we're crossing some lines, here," she said. "This shit with the oaths? It's the kind of thing the old madmen would have tried if they had the right tools. It's a little to the north of slavery, I'll give you that, but it's in the same kingdom and we're not exactly intending to make exceptions. They're all going upstairs, aren't they? Kids'n all. There's going to be a lot of dead people for you to get an army, and a lot more when you actually *use* it."

"The alternative is the dwarves slaughtering them wholesale," I flatly replied.

"Sure," Indrani said. "But that's not why we're doing it, is it? We came for an army and we're doing what it takes to get one. I've got no issue with that, Cat, don't get me wrong."

She leaned forward, eyes alight with the reflection of fire.

"But let's not pretend we're not sending dues downstairs, by doing our do," she softly said. "That's the kind of lie that ends up costly down the line when someone calls you out on it."

I winced and polished off the rest of my glass before extending my hand for a refill. She obliged without a word.

"I tried to make it fair," I said. "But there had to be a punishment to breaking the terms, or they would never have followed them. I tried. . . "

The smile that split my lips was rather bitter.

"To make it a good thing," I finished. "To set down rules that would make them better until they were on their own. But I'm using old arguments, aren't

I? The same every Proceran and Praesi who stole a chunk of Callow used. I'm *civilizing the savages*."

Indrani gently nudged me with her elbow.

"They're pretty fucking savage, no two ways around it," she said. "But let's keep this in mind, before we start using that trick elsewhere. I'd get over it, but I'm guessing you're going to be chewing over this for a while."

"What does it matter if I mourn it, when I do it anyway?" I muttered.

I might not be bosom friends with Cordelia Hasenbach, but she was right about that much. It meant nothing to weep at what I did if I kept on doing it. *You can stop, or you can own it*, I thought. *Anything else is hypocrisy.* But the thought of the drow loose on the surface, without rules to bind them? No, there was no brooking that. *And so monster it is*, I grimaced. I drank again, the foul brew spectacularly failing to grow on me. I extended my arm across Indrani's lap for a top-off.

"So it's a pit fight," I sighed.

"Where there is coincidence, there is story," Archer said. "Now, we know what happens if you come out on top.

Veins of Winter spreading into darkness, an entire kingdom oathbound.

"What happens if the ol' girl does, though?" she mused. "That's the part worth worrying about."

"Dog eat dog," I murmured. "That's how Below works. If my belly's full, I can shake the world. But if she's the one who devours?"

I'd threaded Winter in Night and forced rules through it. It had come easy as breathing to me, even if the oaths themselves had required thought. Because I was the last of a court unmade, the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. I *was* that court, practically speaking. It's wasn't impossible to throw around the kind of workings I'd seen fae royalty employ, it just wasn't possible without going fucking crazy. For now, anyway. How long before my Peerage grew enough the alienation no longer mattered? But there was a sea of power, somewhere in me, and if Sve Noc got her hands on that? No, apotheosis would not be an issue.

"She'll make a play in Strycht," I finally said. "If it's my pivot, it's also hers."

Archer toasted to that, grinning.

"Lies and violence," she offered.

"I'm not knocking to that," I sneered.

"If you do, I have a gift," Indrani tempted.

"Is it booze?" I asked. "Is booze the gift?"

"No," she proudly announced.

"Then it's you," I said. "I'm not falling for that."

"Please," she snorted. "I'd ruin you for all others. Besides, I actually went and picked out something for you."

"Stole," I corrected. "You stole something you are now pawning off on me before you're caught."

"Well, Vivi's not around," Indrani mused. "So someone's got to pick up the slack."

I narrowed my eyes at her, reluctantly curious.

"To absent friends," I said, meeting her toast.

She pouted but we drank on it. She went ruffling through her cloak afterwards, setting down her cup. It was a cozy little nook she'd found, barely large enough for two people, and so she'd set down a thick blanket in an incline and we'd both settled there close to the fire. It was comfortable, and the combined warmth of a friend and a camp fire was oddly soothing. I eyed her curiously as she kept going through her cloak, leathers pulling close on her frame. They were tight, though sadly not all that revealing. Good armour tended to be that way.

"There," she exclaimed, and produced a bit of stone before pressing it into my palm.

No, not just stone I realized. It was a sculpture, though not a very elaborate one. I was admittedly not great connoisseur of the arts, but even to me the work seemed rather bare. Skilfully done, though, I conceded. The androgynous face of a long-haired drow occupied one side of it, the hair growing into the locks of the identical face on the other side. The eyes seemed little more than notches at first glance, but I could barely make out the contours of a character in Crepuscular in them. For one side it was 'all', for the other 'night'. The bottom of the little sculpture had clearly been pried off by blade, I noted with mild amusement.

"... thank you?" I tried.

"Dunno if you noticed, but the deeper into the Everdark we go the more often it comes up," Indrani said. "I asked Soln and apparently it represents Sve Noc."

My brow rose. A two-faced goddess, huh? The term was considered an insult in both Praes and Callow. In my homeland for the implied accusation of hypocrisy, in the Wasteland for the implied single layer of deception. Probably not down here, though.

"What are you up to, I wonder?" I murmured, looking at the stone face.

"And I was going to say we've come so far," Indrani said. "But there you are, talking at stone."

"We were already hunting demigods when you joined up," I replied.

"Sure, but back then we were dealing with everybody's messes," she said. "Now *we're* everybody's mess."

"Truly, you are the great philosopher of our age," I drily said.

She flipped me the finger.

"I do wonder what the rest are up to," she admitted.

"We're not doing that," I said.

She eyed me with surprise.

"Night before the battle starts, going all reminiscing about the old days and what they might be doing?" I elaborated. "For shame, 'Drani. You should know better."

Archer went very quiet, all of a sudden, and her face was unreadable.

"I sometimes forget," she said, "that you don't realize it."

By brow creased.

"Realize what?"

"That no one thinks like that, Catherine," she said. "At least not all the time, like you do."

"Black does," I said.

"And he is an irredeemable madman," Indrani murmured. "To think like you do, it takes... something. Stepping out of yourself, of who you are, and making a story of it. Like all the world is a stage. How strange it must be, to always act like there is an audience. I can hardly imagine the weight of it."

My fingers clenched in my lap.

"You were something else long before the fae made a title of it, weren't you?" she said. "Mad to the bone."

"I don't-" I tried, but what could I say to that?

What could anyone?

"It's all right, Cat," Indrani said, and patted my hand. "We've always known. Sometimes I just forget."

Slowly, my fingers unclenched. She scuttled back and rested her head on my shoulder. It would have been easier for me, given I was the one a foot and a beard short of being a dwarf, but I didn't protest. I leaned back against her, chin atop her head.

"It's how we survive," I finally said. "By watching out for it."

"I know," Indrani said. "But it's all right, you know? To leave it at the door once in a while. Just for a few hours."

"I'm not sure," I quietly admitted, "that I remember how to do that anymore."

There was a long pause and she raised her head, eyes meeting mine. It was slow. I could have leaned away and it would have been the end of it. We'd go back to drinking, and not speak of it again.

I did not lean away.

Her lips moved against mine and it was nothing like the kiss in Lotow. No awkward clicking of teeth, no surprise. Only the taste of liquor and smoke and hands so warm, claiming the nape of my neck as she slipped into my lap and dipped me back. My fingers slid under the edge of her leathers, cupping her arse, and if this was all an illusion it was one I was willing to believe. I came to myself flushed and hard of breathing, my hands pinned above my head as she pressed a kiss against the crook of my neck. Smirking, I could feel it against my skin. It was an effort of will to speak.

"'Drani," I said, lips bruised. "Masego. I don't-"

Want to ruin something good, I thought, *just because I want this.*

She leaned back, hazelnut eyes considering.

"That is that," she said. "This is this."

Deft fingers unmade my belt and I guilty leaned into her touch.

"Just for tonight," she assured me.

"Just for tonight," I murmured, and gave in.

Chapter 71

Ozone

> "A ruler must consider all necessary injuries before beginning to inflict them on an enemy, for through repeated opposition they will learn your virtues and your faults. Strike once, thoroughly."
>
> Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

Nefarious' own Dark Council had once held session in this room, though in practice it had been the Chancellor's council and not the Emperor's. Amadeus had sat at this table before, when nominally in the service of the Tower, but he much preferred the current circumstances. It was only the two of them here today, as if often was: only Tyrants losing their grip on Praes regularly called full sessions. Those who felt secure in their rule did not bother with the pretence of seeking the opinions of others.

"We can't keep this up much longer, Maddie," Alaya said. "The last time taxes ran this high for more than a few years Pernicious lost his throne."

It would have been easy to engage on the basis of technicalities, Amadeus thought. Dread Emperor Pernicious's reign had been plagued by constant rebellions for reasons broader in scope than mere tax rates: his attempt to raise a new capital replacing Ater in the heart of the Wasteland, his inability to keep a Chancellor loyal for more than a few months and his failure to take the Blessed Isle back from the Kingdom of Callow despite three sieges. Still, it would have been beneath the both of them to play that particular game. Allie would not have begun the conversation were there not a true threat looming out of sight. Not for the first time, Black wondered how many such messes might have been avoiding by putting the nobility of the Wasteland to the sword after the civil war.

"I understand the burden is most keenly felt by the most influential among them," he delicately replied. "But the Reforms have produced tangible results, Allie. We're building an army truly capable of winning the wars to come."

She leaned back into her seat, and even after all these years that she allowed herself such weaknesses in front of him warmed his heart. She'd come in formal

dress, today, but left behind her proper regalia. As in everything she did, there was deeper meaning to be found. Formal attire for matters of state, lack of crown to make it clear this was a discussion between partners.

"I know that," Alaya said. "You know that. But in court, they can speak of the fortune being sunk into the Legions of Terror without conquest to show for it. The Truebloods are pushing for either immediate war or dismissal of the military taxes."

"That would be disastrous," Amadeus bluntly said.

"The amount of professional soldiers we're fielding is nearly without precedent in Imperial history," she mildly pointed out.

"It's not about winning the battles, Allie," he sighed. "Our core legions under Grem would have been capable of evicting the paladins from the Blessed Isle as early as two years ago. It's the aftermath that's the issue."

"I understand you have worries about heroes," Alaya frowned. "And I don't agree in the slightest with the time table suggested by the High Lords. Yet I do have to wonder if your level of caution is actually warranted."

"We can't leave them banners to gather around during the occupation," Amadeus said. "Not the Order of the White Hand, not the Fairfaxes, not even the knightly orders. It's not a question about the practical power of those entities, it's what they represent. The Principate had massive city garrisons during its own occupation and they changed nothing. As long as there was a Fairfax loose, Callow still had fight in it. From there it was a question of what would give first: Callowan stubbornness or Procer's willingness to bleed."

"One rarely takes the pot when betting against Callowan spite," Allie conceded, tone darkly amused.

"We're not just planning the war, Alaya," Amadeus said. "We're preparing for the peace afterwards, and moving before the pieces are in place for that is wasting the entire effort."

"Concessions will have to be made," Allie said. "I know you have your doubts about the Imperial governorship system-"

"It's ripe for abuse," he flatly said. "And abuse unmakes all of this. The rule we bring must be, if not just, then at least fair. I trust not Wasteland lords to know even the shadow of that."

"Then I'll wrangle a role as overseer for you," Alaya told him. "If nothing else, we can use the limits we place to weed out the ambitious when they overstep."

Amadeus rose to his feet, pushing the chair back.

"This is the moment where I agreed," Black said, turning towards me. "The first mistake I made after the war, though it would not be the last."

My feet were on solid ground. Stone, the Tower's own. I scuffed my boot against it and flinched at the sound. It felt too real. I'd had Name visions before, but this was... different. I'd never had any agency in them before. I glanced back up and found him patiently watching me.

"Black, what is this?" I asked.

"Remonstration," he said. "Old favours were called in."

My fingers clenched. I did not like the sound of that in the slightest.

"What happened?"

"Unimportant," he dismissed. "It is your latest campaign that we must speak of, Catherine."

"You shouldn't know I'm here," I frowned.

"I know a lot of things I shouldn't," he smiled, but the trace of mirth vanished quick enough. "You head towards a debacle. I am ashamed you cannot see as much, for I must have failed you deeply for that not to be obvious."

"I came here because everywhere else was a dead end," I bitterly replied. "Even you, playing your games in Procer. How'd that turn out for you?"

"My flaws are many, but no excuse for yours," Black chided. "This scheme is flawed. Oaths can be broken, and bereft of that why would any of them obey you?"

"It's a blinking game," I told him. "If the Heavens break the oaths, there's a nation's worth of drow loose in the middle of their backyard. They can't afford that."

"There is no win condition to your plan," he bluntly said. "Only different ways you can lose or put off those losses. You cannot even claim a purpose for this army you'll mass beyond the current wars."

"That's not true," I bit back. "I know exactly where I'll settle them."

"And where would that be?" he skeptically replied. "Your kingdom would not survive the process."

I paused. It was an effort to keep my face loose.

"It's fated," I said. "I doesn't need to be me who does the heavy lifting."

"Fate is a useful tool," Black said, tone irritated, "but it does not-"

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth, interrupting him.

"So *that's* what this is," I mused.

His face blanked. He'd always been eerily pale, but as blood-red lips split into a fanged grin I saw he'd become pale as driven snow. Our surroundings broke apart, ripped away by howling winds – entire chunks of not-Tower whisked away by the raging blizzard. The two of us stood ankle-deep in the snow, facing each other. Above us there was only an endless pitch black night, unknowing of moon or stars. There was only one source of light in here: the burning blue eyes set in my teacher's face.

"And so we resume the lesson," he said, voice echoing of Winter.

His sword left the sheath with a quiet hiss and he advanced. Around us I felt other silhouettes rise and there we no need to look to know whose they were. It would be the Woe, at first. Then Juniper. Aisha. Ratface. Nauk. Robber. Pickler. Kilian. Everyone I'd ever shared a laugh with, everyone I'd ever given the smallest speck of affection to. Anyone I'd ever loved, no matter the manner of it. This was not an unfamiliar sight. While my armies struggled through the Battle of the Camps, Masego and I had been... otherwise occupied. I'd visited his own fever dream, taken him out of it. Mine though, I'd never spoke about. With good reason. They would come for me, swords high. They'd

curse and scream and die and poison everything we'd ever shared with their last words. Then I'd stand alone, for a heartbeat.

And it would start again.

The backlash from our broken gate had entrapped Masego in his own desires. Mine, though, had ground away at me one murder at a time. Winter did enjoy matching its torments to the disposition of the tormented.

"It *would* be capable of doing this, it's true," I spoke out loud.

The raging winds drowned out my words to even my own ears, but that hardly mattered in here.

"But it would also have known about Black," I calmly continued. "You could only reach old Name dreams, couldn't you?"

I paused.

"No, more than that," I corrected. "I've never had one of those with the Dark Council room featuring. You're riding a vision I could have, if my Name took the fore. You can probably look at most of what I've dreamed before as well. But for the personalities, you had the bare bones that gives you with guesswork grafted on."

The fakes ceased marching towards me and I took a deep breath before raising my hand. Will against will, that was all there was to it. I ripped away the veil and met my enemy's eyes. Deep and perfect silver on pitch-black skin. The last time the glare of them had blinded me, but we were in *my* head now. My rules ran deeper than hers.

"I've gone rounds with demons and fae, Sve Noc," I said. "If you want to fuck with my mind, best sharpen your game."

The drow's long hair flowed endlessly behind her, turning into gargantuan strands of Night the further they were from the silver light. She did not seem pleased.

Child, she said. *Your arrogance beggars belief.*

"Mine?" I laughed. "You think you get to win this because I'm close to your domain? *I carry mine with me*, Priestess. And you stepped in it of your own free will."

Your doom comes, she said. *You will drown in despair, alone and lost.*

"And we got off to such a good start," I drawled. "Whatever happened to 'I await you in Tvarigu'?"

Sudden rage suffocated me. A wrath beyond understanding, beyond any single person's capacity. I buckled under the weight of it, but there was something behind. Small, almost like a whimper. Fear, I thought. There was fear.

And wasn't that *interesting*?

"That wasn't you," I said.

Sve Noc snarled.

All is Night, she proclaimed.

"Which are you, I wonder?" I grinned, slow and mean. "The rider or the horse?"

She did not answer with words. The pressure should have crushed me. Would have, if this was her realm and not mine. But old words echoed and rippled, the whisper of a pair of crows surrounded by a sea of birds of paradise, and it washed over me like rain. It was not my truth, but I had partaken in it.

"Uninspired," I said, and the dream shattered.

—

My eyes opened with perfect clarity, lacking the transition between sleep and not.

"That's a little off-putting, I'll admit," Indrani sighed.

I wiggled out from under her arm, already missing the warmth, and sat up. The blanket slid down, baring the upper half of my body, but Archer didn't even bother to leer. She just snuggled deeper into the covers, to my mild offence.

"Dare I ask?" I said.

"The heartbeat thing," she elaborated. "I got used to the cool and skin and stopped noticing when it wasn't there, but it started up the moment you woke up. How does that even work?"

"Fuck if I know," I admitted, passing a hand through my tangled hair. "Zeze says it has nothing to do with pushing blood anymore, so it might just beat when I remember it should."

The fire had gone out while we slept but that changed little for me. The sensation between different temperatures still came to me, it just... didn't matter. It was more like a colour than a feeling. It wasn't the same for Indrani, though, because my toes informed me she'd put on pants at some point I definitely remembered taking off. Among, uh, other things. I cleared my throat awkwardly. Indrani cranked open a bleary eye.

"You're not gonna get all skittish about this, are you?" she said. "Considering how enthusiastic you-"

"I remember, yes," I coughed. "It'd been a while, 'Drani."

She laughed musically.

"Yeah, well, it shows you've been mostly with women for a few years," she said. "You're a lot better than I thought you'd be at giving h-"

"If you keep dishing it out, it'll burn out the embarrassment," I tried.

She mulled over that for a moment.

"True," she said. "I should probably ration it out."

She finally deigned to rise, pushing herself up and stretching out like a lazy cat. Considering the blanket had completely fallen, that did rather interesting things to a frame I was now intimately familiar with. She caught me staring and grinned.

"Already?" she smugly said.

"Any port in a storm," I sneered.

"Ouch," she said, putting a hand over her heart. "That one drew blood, Cat."

Not really, if her deeply amused tone was any indication. I rested my bare back against the stone and closed my eyes to wallow in this passing moment of peace. Soon enough I would have to arm myself for war and strike the first

blow of the Battle of Great Strycht, but just for a little while I could enjoy this. The world outside our nook could remain a faraway abstract a little bit longer. If I'd done this with someone else I might have feared that it would change what lay between us, but not with Indrani. She had a rather cavalier attitude towards bedplay, as a rule, even if she'd largely refrained from indulging since becoming part of the Woe. That'd been a choice on her part, though. She was attractive, a well-known war hero and Named besides: if she'd actually sought out company, she wouldn't have spent a single night alone since Second Liesse.

"And what great thoughts are we having?" Indrani said, sitting up at my side.

I opened my eyes and found her looking at me with fond amusement.

"I was wondering about the self-inflicted nature of your dry spell," I admitted.

"Was trying something," she shrugged. "Still on the fence about it. Besides, you're one to talk. When we first met you could hardly keep your hands off the redhead."

Kilian, I thought, but no pang of blurry regret came. It'd been a while since it had ceased to. It'd seemed so much more important when I was in the middle of it. But now my hours were filled bargaining with empires and waging desperate wars, when the stewardship of Callow did not swallow them whole, and the intensity had faded. It seemed such small thing, compared to what was behind me and what still lay ahead.

"It was new for me," I admitted. "I'd never stuck that long with anyone before. Never wanted to, either."

"Heartbreaker, were you?" Indrani snorted.

I shrugged.

"I knew I was going to leave someday," I said. "So there was no point."

"I can't imagine you married," she admitted. "Or even settled down."

"I was kind of proposed to the once," I mused.

She grinned.

"Now *this* I've got to hear," Indrani said.

"I used to work at this tavern in Laure, the Rat's Nest," I said. "The owner hinted pretty heavily that if I married his son I'd inherit the place after he died."

"Truly a love story for the ages," Archer commented gravely.

"He was kind of an ass, and pretty busy ploughing our bard," I noted. "Harrion didn't push when I made it clear it wasn't happening, he was a good sort. Now if *Duncan Brech* had gotten on his knees, my tender maidenly heart might have skipped a beat. That boy was fit like you wouldn't believe."

"And no one else has tried since?" Indrani said, sounding genuinely curious. "I thought popping out heirs was the queenly thing to do."

"Talbot mentioned it once or twice," I agreed. "And everyone influential with spare kin paraded a prospect at court. But I've no intention of staying on the throne, so why bother? I was only ever a temporary measure."

The Foundling dynasty would be short-lived, which was probably for the best. If a successor bearing my name got into even half the messes I had, they'd be more curse than king.

"We children of dew and lightning," Indrani murmured. "Transient and terrible in our passing."

She did say beautiful things, sometimes, for all her cheerful crassness.

"Where's it from?" I asked.

"Some poem the Lady taught me when I was kid, from far across the sea," she said. "Her father loved it."

"It's a big world, isn't it?" I said. "We've seen more than most on this continent, the two of us, and it's still such a small fraction of it."

"It's not about how long we last, I don't think," Archer said. "Who could possibly live long enough to see it all? We just have to make the most of what we get."

"We're probably the first humans to walk the Everdark in a few centuries, if not more," I offered.

"Oh, we'll do a little more than just walk," Indrani said, lips quirking.

The certainty in her voice forged a smile of my own, though it faded after a few moments.

"I dreamt, while I slept," I said.

"Winter again?" she asked. "Hakram said whatever you're seeing must be pretty fucking grim, if you're not even willing to talk to *him* about it."

"Yeah, well, Winter doesn't do nice as a rule," I muttered. "But it wasn't that, at least not tonight. I got an important visitor."

"No shit?" Archer said. "Our old buddy Sve Noc showed up? What did she want?"

"They, I think," I said. "And I don't mean it the way it's usually meant for drow."

"A two woman show," she frowned. "Didn't see that one coming. They tend to watch each other's back the same way Praesi do – considering where to plunge the knife. Did she drop in for a bit of trash talk? It's only traditional before villains throw down."

"She wanted me to believe that real bad, by the end of it," I said. "But she played tricks early on trying to get me to answer questions."

"O Mighty Catherine, would you pretty please tell me your battle plans?" Indrani mocked in a high pitched voice.

"That I wouldn't have minded," I admitted. "It'd mean she thinks it could go either way. But what she was actually asking was where I intend to take the drow down the line, and I mislike the shape of that. It feels like she's playing a different game."

And Captain's death was proof enough of how costly that sort of disconnect could be.

"We're the outsiders here," Archer said. "It was given we'd have to go in blind. But two heads, huh. Wonder how that came about."

"I'm more interested in how it can be used," I said. "The first one I spoke with had a fairly different take on this mess than the other."

"Think there's an angle there?" she asked.

I breathed out slowly.

"There was a story I used to love when I was a kid," I said. "The orphanage was an Imperial institution, when it came down to it, and the tavern I worked that was heavy on Legion clientele. Neither was in the habit of peddling Callowan stories to impressionable young minds."

I half-smiled, thinking of those days where the trifling had loomed so tall.

"But I got my hands on this old book at the Rat's Nest," I said. "Called *Stirring Tales of Chivalry*."

"Was it all about lances and ladies?" Indrani asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes.

"It was water damaged, so most of it was just blurry ink – probably why the family never managed to pawn it," I mused. "But there were a few stories in it that were readable, and one I must have read a hundred times. It was about this giant ogre, you see, that lived somewhere in the south of Callow. It had two heads and it could do magic, so even though knight after knight tried to slay it all that happened was that it made a house of their bones."

"They call their city in the Wasteland the Hall of Skulls, right?" Indrani said. "It holds up."

I imagined General Hune would have some issues with the story if she ever heard it, but then most my high-ranking officers would have problems with Callowan folk tales. They, uh, tended to get killed in them. To popular acclaim.

"So there's these three knights that head out to slay it," I said. "One's strong, one's quick, the last is clever."

"Clever survives at the end," Indrani immediately predicted.

"The last one listed always survives, you're not impressing anyone," I grunted. "Anyway, they go up to the ogre one after the other. Yes, bad tactics I know so don't even start. Strong and quick get fried, because magic is perfidious and all that. Each of the ogre's heads eats one of the dead."

"I thought it was using the bones for its house," Archer said.

"Look, I never said it was high literature," I said. "Clever knight goes up, and then says 'I surrender', flatters them and says they're invincible."

"And then it asks which head is going to eat him after he dies," Indrani said.

"Exactly," I said. "The heads start arguing, the clever knight makes it worse, and eventually one head clubs the other in anger and they both die."

"I thought it was a mage ogre," she said.

"It also had a club," I sighed.

"This is why people make fun of Callowan literature, Cat," Indrani said, not unkindly.

"My point," I said, valiantly pressing on, "is that creatures with two heads can be of two minds."

There was a pause.

"Was that all?" Archer asked.

"There's another version of it that I came across later," I said.

"No doubt it will be as stirring as was promised by the title," Indrani replied, smothering a smile.

"In that version, the third knight is a young Elizabeth Alban," I said.

"The Queen of Blades herself," she said. "She plies a clever trick as well?"

"No," I said. "She straight up murders the ogre, because that's what Elizabeth Alban *does*."

That surprised a laugh out of her and so I left it at that. We shared a comfortable silence for a little while longer, until I could no longer even slightly justify lingering. Reluctantly I rose up, somewhat pleased she was finally taking the time to ogle my nakedness, and picked up my clothes. I shimmied on my trousers as she reached for her leathers and I was surprised by the muted intimacy of getting dressed together. It wasn't domestic – the word would never feel anything but forced matched to Indrani – but it was a kind of closeness we'd never shared before. There was, I thought, nothing to regret about last night. Belts tightened, weapons at our hips, we left the dead fire behind us.

There was a war to wage.

Chapter 72

Outflow

> "For though these armed men may carry banner and obey a prince, without justice they are only bandits."
>
> Extract from "The Faith of Crowns", by Sister Salienta

It'd be the first battle in a few years where I wouldn't have Juniper to run my army for me. I hadn't quite realized how much I'd come to rely on the Hellhound even before the blades were out, when it was all words and maps and trying to figure out how not to get your people killed. Not that map were all that reliable down here. I had four different tracings from mosaics, each contradicting each other on pretty major points and one insisting rather boldly that this entire cavern was actually three dozen miles to the west and I was sadly mistaken about what my eyes were seeing. I'd settled on having a chalk outline of the former islands and lakebed drawn on a slab of polished granite, well aware it would be imprecise and actual distances would be a guessing game. It'd been strange, though, looking down at a battlefield and not having Juniper leaning over at my side. Frowning over the latest imperfection in the war engine we'd raised together, muttering under her breath about Ratface being a tight-fisted twerp. She never would again, I realized with a start.

Ratface was dead.

There would be a reckoning for that, one day, I thought. It seemed a small sin when compared to all the many injuries levied unto Callow by the Empress, some likely to become actual legend in years to come, but it counted to *me*. As Diabolist might say, a hatred belonging the woman instead of the queen. *Won't matter if I don't make it through this,* I reminded myself. It wouldn't either, I knew, if I survived in failure. Only victors ever got to truly settle their grudges. The grim thought called me the order. Perhaps, I decided as I studied the chalk battlefield, it was for the best that my marshal did not hold command for this one. Juniper's art of war was one of discipline and manoeuvre, of bold tactics and vicious traps. It was the bastard child of the way the Legions of Terrors had won their wars, and for all that the faces of my legionaries had grown paler

over the years the heart of it remained forged out of the Reforms. A core of well-trained infantry empowered by specialists, professional soldiers costly to train and equip but who could usually beat significantly larger enemy armies.

Like much of what Black had wrought, for the three Imperial marshals might have been deep contributors but there was no denying the central architect, it prized skill over power. It was almost more a set of tools a brilliant mind could use to produce spectacular results than a proper army – it was fortunate that there'd been so many promising generals to be found when the Reforms first took place, and in retrospective the number of them that wasn't human did much to explain the sudden gains of greenskins and ogres in what had once been a very human institution. At least near the top. Few of the old Black Knights had balked at sending orcs and goblins into the meat grinder to the west when campaigns got going. It was a good model, I thought, though to maintain it in the long term Callow would have to build a War College of its own. Talented officers did not grow on trees. It had its limits, though. Procer had made that clear when it'd tossed a sea of conscripts at the two passes defending Callow and effectively accepted every trade in soldier's lives, knowing they could afford the most spendthrift or rates and still come out the victor. The Legions, and even the Army of Callow, were armies built for a certain kind of war.

They would be lost, down here, so it was for the best Juniper was not here to go mad over the coming mess.

I would have liked to claim I had something as neat and pretty as a three-step scheme, that I'd read the opposition and would make them dance to my tune, but the unfortunate truth was that I was an outsider down here. Even now that I'd stolen Akua's fluency in Crepuscular and I could read most runes as well as speak the tongue, a lot of what was taking place was beyond me. I didn't have the Jacks and the Eyes feeding me reports of about who despised who and why, I didn't have histories or supply assessments or even more than bare bones scout reports about enemy strength and position. The traitor sigils we'd approached had provided information, sure, but how much of it could really be relied on? They had objectives of their own which didn't necessarily entail my own army coming out on top, no matter what they said, and without an easy way to independently confirm what they'd told me I'd had to make some choices half blind. At first, I'd tried to get as many solid numbers as I could and work from there. I had a good idea of what the Rumena Sigil could bring to the table, for example, because a lot of people in Strycht hated them and wanted them dead.

But then I'd tried to get a solid notion of what the Jindrich could field – the Rumena were the most powerful sigil by far, but there was a reason the Jindrich Sigil was the undisputed runner-up – but all that accomplished was making clear the scope of the problem. Mighty Jindrich's envoy, fresh off the pact we'd made behind the back of the rest of the city, had informed me they had around one hundred and fifty Mighty of varying ranks they could bring into the

fight when time came. We'd bribed three lesser sigils going thirsty with blocks of ice for information on the same subject, since ice was a lot easier to transport and didn't require a highly visible fairy gate to deliver, and we'd gotten three different numbers between one and four hundred. Now, at the scale of the kind of battles I'd fought on the surface, a variation of a few hundred wouldn't mean much. But down here? It'd made no sense to me. All the sigils had small territories, were bound to keep a vigilant eye on each other and constant raids should give them a good idea of enemy strength.

Diabolist figured it out first, because we *had* gotten some very precise out of those bribes that was the same over all three reports. Small details, like the first rylleh under Jindrich being able to shapeshift and the four shapes it could use, or that the third and fourth under Rumena usually fought as a pair. It wasn't that the drow were shit at spying, I knew they weren't. There was a Secret that was pretty close to fae glamour, after all, which was why Ivah had taken so well to it in the first place. It was just that, in fights between sigils, usually the only people that actually mattered to the outcome were the ten, fifteen strongest Mighty. Raids succeeded or failed depending on who was leading the attack and the defence. Why would anyone bother keeping track of how many dzulu there were when a single rylleh could tear through an entire cohort without even working up a sweat? We could and had gotten mostly reliable information on those particular individuals, but getting irritated that no one could give me good troop assessments was rather missing the point.

I wouldn't win or lose the Battle of Great Strycht through dzulu and lesser Mighty, so instead of getting lost in a maze of unreliable reports I needed to focus on the aspects that would actually make me come out on top. Namely, that most of those people were at each other's throats if not actively trying to kill each other even as I planned. When you looked at it through that lens, the situation was a lot less grim. For one, my own army was larger than the Rumena Sigil's and I'd bet on my Peerage over their Mighty any day. My lords had lost nothing of their old prowess and gained much from Winter. Considering the Rumena were the most powerful tribe in Strycht, that meant I could expect that if it came to a slugging match I could come out on top against any one sigil – barring an unexpectedly powerful Mighty fucking up my day, which was admittedly quite possible. The crux of this, then, would be preventing the sigils of Strycht from actually unifying against me. Which wasn't nearly as hard as it should have been, given that I was an eldritch invader of dubious purposes and origins. Unfortunately, there was also the Longstride Cabal to account for.

Two hundred of the most dangerous Mighty in the Everdark apt to pop out at any moment to come straight for my head, and probably the Peerage's too for good measure. They weren't here for territory or wealth, all they wanted was the glory of crushing me. Which meant negotiating with them in any way was effectively impossible unless I could punctuate my offer with 'or you will immediately die', and even then it might be a toss-up. I'd picked the brains of my lords for a little more on the Longstrides, wondering if the angle of promising

them a battle at a designated time and place could get them off my back long enough to deal with the Strycht sigils. I'd gotten some pretty heart laughs in response, as my Peerage assumed that I was actually joking. Cultural divide, I decided. The whole glory in battle thing was tied pretty heavily to honour, back home, but in the Everdark was the word was only ever used in the sense meaning 'respect'. The whole rules of behaviour part of drow culture had been pretty much ripped out and replaced with the Tenets of Night when Sve Noc decided it was time for a regime change… however long ago that'd been.

Since sidelining the Longstride Sigil wasn't an option, I had to either secure the city before they arrived or make them part of the plan somehow.

The clean play was taking care of Strycht first. Ivah and my Peerage had found me the right tools to get that particular pile of dry burning, which would weaken the opposition before we struck and allow us to take it with moderate casualties before they realized what was happening. Give or take a few angry sigil-holders. Then before the Longstrides arrived we'd consolidate, harvest Night and title the willing before the enemy struck. Most my Peerage had been proponents of that course of action, betting on a proper ambush laid in Strycht to take care of the problem. I had issues with that plan, though. I'd taken enough cities in my time to know that soldiers walking through the streets wasn't enough to actually establish control. That held twice as much for a place like the Everdark, where the nisi might not make the kind of mess an occupying force would have to deal with in Callow but millennia of tribal rule ensured there would be significant resistance among the drow 'upper class'. In essence, anyone with a speck of power not under oath not to stab me in the back would the moment it looked like there was a chance it might pay off.

Wouldn't be much of an issue if I *did* put everyone with a speck of power under oath, but practically speaking that'd take days we didn't have. Establishing order after a battle always took longer than the fighting itself, and the margin of manoeuvre was thin enough as it was. I could have put the finest minds at my disposal to work on solving that – well, mind, Archer tended to solve her problems only one way – but there was a larger problem behind. Aside from the shaky foundations we'd be making our stand on, when the Longstride Cabal showed up we'd be the only enemy on the field. The totality of their efforts would be dedicated to killing me and wiping out my Peerage, with everything else a minor distraction at best. Sure, I could try to drown them in fresh recruits. Send every dzulu and Mighty I had after them, in warbands led by the Peerage, but casualties would be brutal. And when they converged on me, because they absolutely would, the kind of workings I'd need to pull out to stay alive would probably level Strycht and the people living in it. Evacuating the city in advance was certainly possible, but it'd also be hanging up a sign warning them of the ambush.

So either massive civilian death toll or the cohort of hardened killers drunk on Night came in forewarned. One I refused out of principle, the other had decent odds of leading to a rout.

Which brought us to the other option. That one had been cooking in the back of my head since I'd first gotten Ivah's reports. The sigils in Great Strycht were, well, at each other's throats to put it mildly. Starting a city-wide fight in there would be about as hard as starting a fire with a jug of oil and a torch in hand. Once hostilities erupted, there would be no banners and uniforms: only a lot of scared and angry drow attacking everything looking remotely like a threat. That was the thing with civil wars, wasn't it? It was hard to tell who the enemy was. Sure, infighting within actual sigils would probably be minimal while they were in the middle of a battle. But cabals would split and even nominal allies would have to wonder what was going on and if the other ones were in on it. A very volatile mixture that could be made much worse with a few nudges, personified by a cheerfully murderous Indrani. For once, her ability to pick fights with anything sight could actually come in useful! Deep down I'd always known there would be a payoff for that eventually. This part, in and of itself, wasn't significantly different from what an attempt to seize Strycht would be like.

Which was where the... interesting part came in. The Longstride Cabal, as my Peerage had noted, were not exactly the diplomatic kind of crew. Oh, to have survived this long they probably must have *some* degree of moderation. Otherwise another band of old monsters would have put them down by now. But while Great Strycht was further into the inner ring than say, Lotow, it was far from the heartlands. I tended to compare it to Marchford, in my mind. An important city, given the lake if loomed over, but not a major player – like Laure, Liesse and Vale had once been in Callow. The Longstrides could come in here and expect to be the biggest kids on the block because, well, they actually would be. Now, combine that with the way drow usually behaved whenever they stood even an inch over another drow and throw in that their cabal hunted powerful entities for sport? The moment someone gave them lip they'd answer with blades, and from there it would escalate. Sigil-holders would know what they were dealing with and likely withdraw if given the chance, but to be able to do that they'd need to have a clear idea of what was going on and the presence of mind to make that decision.

Both were pretty rare things, when in the middle of an all-out battle that would determine whether you and your tribe survived the night.

Akua had called it fighting fire with fire, when I'd put forward the notion, but I disagreed. That implied a degree of control we wouldn't have after the blades came out. It was more like... fighting a battle by starting another half-dozen battles. I didn't have to win, not exactly. I just had to lose less than everyone else. Just enough that I got to take home the prize when the dust settled. We'd used our last few days to put the pieces in motion for what Diabolist scathingly named Operation Damage Control, all coming to a head on the day we believed the Longstride Cabal would arrive. Spending the last night with Indrani should have cleared my mind, but instead when the hour came I had a fresh worry to chew over. I still believed that the plan, if it could

be called that, would serve its purposes. There would be setbacks, but I still had cards up my sleeves. I hadn't wasted my days since Great Lotow, or forgot the hard lesson the duel with Mighty Urulan had taught me. If I fought the same way I had since claiming my mantle, I would lose. *Badly*. Preparations had been made accordingly. But that wasn't the worry, was it? There was only one thing I knew this morning I hadn't last night.

Sve Noc would act. Not down the line, not through intermediaries. She'd strike, today and straight at me. If this really was a death match for Below's favour, then the chosen would have to bleed. And that changed the nature of this battle, didn't? I did not feel like a coincidence, that's she'd shown her hand only this late. When the wheels were already turning and it was too late to stop them.

"A good morning to you, dearest."

I did not turn or reply. Behind me the camp was stirring for war, preparing to march. Below me plains of half-dried mud stretched out all the way to the distant plateaus and hills of Great Strycht. My fingers drummed against the hilt of my sword, the gesture failing to settle me. Diabolist was not offended by my lack of reply, simply coming to stand by my side.

"Did you enjoy yourself, at least?" Akua drawled.

I glanced at her, eyebrow rising. Did she... Well, I supposed it hadn't been the most discreet of trysts. Drow senses were shaper than those of humans, even those that weren't Mighty, and the shade's were sharper still.

"Sve Noc paid a visit to my dreams," I said.

I had no intention of discussing how I spent my nights with Akua Sahelian. She was not the Scribe to my Calamities, part of us in her own way. I would not forget how she had come into my service, no matter how useful. Or how tiring. That was the part that surprised me, how *tiring* it could be to hate Diabolist. The Doom of Liesse was reminder enough, but sometimes it felt like I was flogging myself with the memory of it.

As, no doubt, she intended.

"Her purpose?" she asked.

Whatever whimsy there'd been was gone. She understood perhaps even better than me the seriousness of that.

"Information," I said. "About what I'd do with the drow, if I led them out of the Everdark. About how I'd deal with the Heavens if they meddled."

Scarlet eyes tightened.

"That such an entity would consider surrender is highly unlikely," she said, pausing to allow me to contradict her.

Both assessing and fishing for fresh information with the same sentence. Fucking Praesi, I thought half-admiringly.

"She was definitely hostile," I said. "And tried to overcompensate when I caught her out. All doom and damnation. But she slipped up – there's two of them, I'm almost certain. And they're not necessarily aligned in their opinions."

"Now *that* is rather interesting," Akua said. "I had previously assumed that her lack of action was the result of either rules or indifference. Power akin to a god's does tend to come with the limitations of one."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

"I got a pat on the back and a badge from that order's grandmaster and I'm not feeling all that constrained," I noted.

"You've only ever used a fraction of your power," Diabolist said, and raised her hand to prevent me from replying to that. "For good reason, I am aware. The alienation would endanger you. Yet that is why such entities have seats of power, Catherine. The Dead King rules the Serenity. The Priestess of Night rules the Everdark, or close enough. There is a reason my ancestors raised *pyramids* to gather power, darling one. The summit stands on the steps, and is greater for it."

"I do rule a kingdom, Akua," I reminded her. "You know, little place between Praes and Procer? There was a coronation a while back, in between the constant fucking wars."

"Ah, but do you rule it as Sovereign of Moonless Nights?" she said. "Hardly. Even the Wild Hunt are merely in your service, not true vassals. You bound neither the Woe nor the realm to your mantle."

"Making Arcadia but worse out of my home isn't exactly in the works, yes," I flatly replied.

"And so you have not grown roots," Diabolist said. "An apotheosis incomplete, so to speak. Did you not wonder why the Grey Pilgrim and his ilk are so desperate to remove you from the throne?"

"I'm a villain ruling Callow," I said. "I don't believe we need to revisit the whole Calernian balance of power argument, Gods know I'm tired of hearing about it."

"The Carrion Lord ruled it for decades," Akua said. "And, to be frank, the legitimacy of your rule is only marginally better."

I frowned. It was a pretty sparse forest she was describing to me, and as a rule I tended to think I understood heroes better than she did. But she *was* a villain, in a way I'd never really been. From a people who'd been fighting heroes for centuries. She might not always be right, she often wasn't, but once in a while her perspective did allow her to see things I didn't.

"Roots," I said. "That's what you're implying. The Peregrine worries about me growing roots in Callow."

"It is one thing to slay a villainous queen of Callow," Diabolist said. "Quite another to seek the destruction of the immortal Black Queen, the wintry personification of centuries of her people's grudges. The first is a threat. The second is another Dead King, one whose armies can march through the realm of the fae."

"He knows," I said, then hesitated. "Or at least suspects that I intend to abdicate."

"And so you were handled with gloves," Akua said. "Deals and stories, marching armies instead of a Choir unleashed. You ascribe this to the man being reasonable, but he is a *hero*. If that decision was made, it was made because he feared that cornering you would see you tumbling through the threshold of apotheosis complete."

Or he could have been genuinely trying to limit the damages the country would suffer. If he had started calling on Choirs, I'd have needed to escalate accordingly. *But when the pivot came*, I thought, *he backed Hasenbach. Backed the crusade victorious at all costs. He was willing to play within certain boundaries, but only so long as he'd win.* The trouble with Akua was she would be convincing even if she was wrong, because she was a persuasive person period. I was unwilling to put any stock in it before I had Hakram and maybe Masego serving as advocated for the opposite thought.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "For now, the war is down here. And it's Sve Noc we're facing."

"Part of her, at least," Diabolist mused. "I wonder if the simplest answer is truly the correct one."

"Simplest?"

"One is the pyramid," Akua smiled. "The other standing atop it."

A rider and a horse, I thought. I'd considered that as well.

"It would explain why we're not fighting the Night," I said. "Just something using it."

"Strife, mother of a thousand opportunities," she quoted in Mthethwa.

An old proverb I would have been able to name the home of even if she'd spoken it in Lower Miezan.

"I need you to do something for me," I said.

She turned to face me completely. In Masego that would have been a notice I had his full attention, but with her I always had that. Even when she pretended otherwise.

"I had role given in the battle to come," Akua said.

"I know," I said. "But this is more important."

"And what exactly do you need of me, dearest?" she asked.

There were a lot of ways I could have answered her. Some true, others euphemisms or a hundred different shades of flippant. It'd helped me over the years, the quips. Allowed me to make it a joke or a game, anything but a reality so often ugly. But if I was to let the monster off her leash, then she should be given her due.

"Folly," I said.

Akua Sahelian smiled, and in that smile lay the promise of things great and terrible to behold.

Chapter 73

Feeder Bands

> "The rat it bites the rat
> On the tail, the tail, the tail
> The rat it does grow fat
> And swell, and swell, and swell
> But a rat will bite the rat
> On the tail, the tail, the tail
> So we'll sing the chain again."
>
> "Growing Horns", a Lycaonese nursery rhyme

The first blow struck in the Battle of Great Strycht was an illusion.

Glamour, to be precise, woven by my own will. I'd seen no need to waste strength by making it too elaborate, so it'd remained a simple streak of blue light high up in the 'sky'. In of itself it did nothing, but it didn't have to: it was a signal. If my army stepped into the city uninvited, we were the enemy. The ones everyone would be aiming at, and even the few sigils who'd struck pacts with us would think twice before coming out on our side. Whether it was to see if we could match the opposition or simply to bleed us a little first to have a better position after the battle didn't matter, since I couldn't afford those kinds of losses. No, I needed blades to already be out when we struck. Thankfully, Ivah had provided me with the means to ensure that. The Rumena Sigil, Gods bless their ambitious souls, had decided that the barbarians knocking at the gate was the right moment to make a play for the control of Great Strycht. My Lord of Silent Steps had learned as much after grabbing one of their lesser Mighty and interrogating it thoroughly. Not so thoroughly, though, that it had died from my lieutenant's attentions.

So we'd made the songbird sing a second time, this time in front of the inner circle of the Jindrich Sigil. They'd been the natural targets for sowing dissension, and not just because they'd already made a deal with me. See, the Jindrich were the second most powerful sigil in the city. They'd opened negotiations because they were under attack by a cabal of lesser sigils going after their water reserves and agreed to take oaths under condition of those

enemies being humbled, but they weren't bound to me. Not really. It was an alliance of convenience for them, and those were not to be relied upon. But this changed things. As the second best, the Jindrich would have to be annihilated of the Rumena were ever to fully take over Great Strycht. More than that, we'd hinted that the sigils attacking them were doing so at the invitation of Mighty Rumena – which, for all I knew, could be true. It didn't matter if it was false, though, because from the perspective of Mighty Jindrich it made sense and confirmed its worst suspicions. It was not hard to get people to believe the worst of each other when they'd been feuding cyclically for a few hundred years.

So my alliance had become a little less shaky, and I'd put it to work. The Rumena had been the kings of the island for a very long time, and never been all that nice about it: to the extent that there was technically a cabal including most everyone else dedicated to keeping them from devouring the rest of the city. That meant they had a lot of enemies, and that the Jindrich had... well, allies was a bit of a stretch. Sigils they'd fought with more than against for the sake of keeping the Rumena in check. Mighty Jindrich had reached out through envoys and warned them in advance of the plot, which was exactly what I'd needed. If my people had done that, it would have been taken as naked plot to incite civil war. Which, dues where they were due, it was. Coming from Mighty Jindrich, though? It had a reputation as an implacable berserker, not an intriguer. Put that together with our songbird, and you had all the necessary ingredients for a discreet coalition. Once it'd been assembled, the hard sell had been making it wait. Understandably, the drow preferred being on the offensive if there was going to be a battle: Mighty were no strangers to collateral damage, and they'd rather it happen on Rumena territory than theirs.

So Mighty Jindrich had 'tricked' me. It had assured its allies that it'd managed to convince me to send a force into the field to back them up, small enough the risks of it turning on them afterwards was minimal. But there was a catch. It'd only managed to wrangle that loan on a specific day. Namely, the one where the Longstride Cabal was suspected to be arriving – not that they knew that. The rest of the coalition had reluctantly agreed to the delay, weighing that my own people sharing the losses was worth the risk of discovery implicit to sitting on a plot like this for a few days. I was pretty sure that when the time came, Mighty Jidnrich would actually turn its coalition on us if it thought we'd been weakened enough to be beaten. That was fine, though, because I'd betrayed it first. Ivah had dug up from the prisoner that the Rumena had approached ambitious rylleh instead their target sigils and we'd helped clean up those leaks by providing the names we have. Not of the exact rylleh, sadly, since we didn't have those – the prisoner hadn't been that high up in the Rumena Sigil. But sigil names had been given and their sigil-holders had picked out the most likely treachery candidates for killing before they joined battle.

But we'd held two names back. Akua had removed them from the head of the prisoner just to be sure it wouldn't sing an inconvenient song even if prompted. I'd been inclined to think that even if we did nothing the enemy

would find out, but best to be sure. It was now a certainty the Rumena knew there was an attack coming, and that meant they'd be intercepting it on their own chosen grounds. And so an illusory streak of blue light got the first round of betrayals started even as my army moved out. It was the signal for the coalition to begin its attack, for the Rumena to begin their counter-attack and my own plans to begin.

The drow were a fair hand at betrayal, but I had the Fairy Godmother of Treachery in my service.

My drow set out in warbands, treading the half-dried lakebed quietly. Soldiers would have moved in formation, according to precise orders, but I had none. Only warriors, and those couldn't be made into neat companies with designated officers. They'd move and fight as tribes, led into battle by the members of my Peerage. I'd studied the grounds for days and spoken with drow better learned in Everdark warfare than I, ultimately coming to the conclusion that there would be four different skirmishes that would dictate the outcome of this battle. Two would take place to the east, near the islands-turned plateaus of the Jindrich and the Hushu – respectively our main allies and the leaders of a cabal of four mid-tier sigils that'd remained aloof from the intrigues unfolding across the city. That sector would be the most volatile, since the two different skirmishes could easily turn into a single broader pitched battle if we weren't careful. That the Hushu and their allies would get involved was a given, but on what side they would fall in this was anyone's guess. Those fronts had been named, respectively, Spear and Dice.

One would take place to the north, in what had once been a lake-within-the-lake. The drow called it the Flowing Gardens, as it'd once been an entire district of small stone islets covered in sculptures and greenery. A place of leisure for the ancient drow, where pleasure ships had lazily drifted between enchanted metalwork that sung songs when touched by the breeze. It'd been centuries since those days, though, and now the Flowing Gardens were an eagerly fought-over battleground. The district had both water and food, after all, and the entire thing had been fed lakewater through a complex system of canals and sluice gates: holding those was a sign of power among sigils. My confiscating of Lake Strycht had lowered the waters within until the majority of the sections had become little more than large scummy ponds whose dirty waters were still fought over brutally by the minor sigils occupying the district and its outlying regions. Most members of my 'allied' coalition under Mighty Jindrich were from there, and my assessment was that the Rumena were going to hit them hard and early to keep them from assembling. Which would draw opportunists from the warlike sigils in the region, making it a beautifully chaotic mess. As a front, it'd been named for what it was going to turn into: a Pit.

The fourth and final front would be in the centre of the city. It would be the slowest to come into being, and at the start wouldn't even exist. The Rumena Sigil's territory was to the west, a five large and comparatively rich islands serving as the heartlands of their tribal possessions, but the fight would never

get that far. The forces going after Mighty Rumena and its warriors after being freed from other fronts would pass through the central district of the city, since it was the quickest and easiest path, which meant that was where the ambush would be waiting. It was good grounds, I'd been told, for that kind of fighting. The centre of the city was filled with old temples and administrative complexes, set on a massive plain of solid rock. Every single building was separated from the others by deep grooves carved into the stone, more or less small canals, and the drying of Lake Strycht had turned the place into a labyrinth of bridges and corridors on three separate levels. A good spot for the Rumena to await an enemy force, after they'd devoured the sigils currently occupying it. It'd be hard to concentrate troops there, and either attacking Mighty would stick together and risk lesser warriors being casually wiped out or they'd separate and a hundred small duels would erupt on bridges and alleys.

We'd called that front the Woods.

I stood on a promontory as my army moved out, beginning the trek to the battles, and below me stood those that would lead them in battle. There'd been a fresh addition to my Peerage, a twelfth member. The Agus Sigil weren't part of Strycht proper but they'd held territory close, and been half-mad with thirst when Lord Zarkan found them. Mighty Agus had not been difficult to talk into becoming Lord Agus, though it seemed uncomfortable with its new role and wary of the rest of the Peerage. With good reason, I thought. Before oaths were taken, most of those drow would have wiped out its sigil in an afternoon's work and done so without batting an eye. It was the weakest of my lords, and knew it. The others did not share its mood, though. There was the scent of eagerness in the air, like they were itching for the fight. They probably were, I admitted to myself. Drow were not the kind of people to leave power unused after it was gained, and they had gained much from bargaining with me. I took a moment to gaze down at them in silence, wondering how many would survive the day.

"Today," I stated, "we take Great Strycht."

There were hard smiles at that, but no cheers. That was not the drow way.

"I won't waste your time with a speech," I said. "You all know what I'm about – we'll be dancing on the edge until the last beat."

I had their attention, though not because of any eloquence on my part. What came next was what they'd waited for all this while.

"And now what you actually want to know," I smiled. "Lords Nodoi, Losle and Zarkan: yours is the Dice front."

Zarkan was hard to read, because it hated my guts and that was usually the main thing to be found rather than anything more nuanced, but the others were easier. Relief. They knew their job would be mainly containment.

"Lords Slaus, Vasyl and Sagas, yours will be the Spear front."

Nods, poorly-hidden surprise. Given that Mighty Jindrich would be there, the expectation had been that either Soln or Ivah would take the lead there. They were, after all, the two most powerful of my Peerage. And those I trusted

the most, though that was not a hard hill to climb. I had other plans for those two, though.

"Lords Soln, Lovre, Vadimyr and Agus, you will be serving as our strategic reserve," I said. "You'll be hanging back for the initial stretch of the battle."

Disappointment from Lovre and Vadimyr, I found. They'd been the most recent additions until Agus, and were eager to prove themselves in a battle that wasn't waged against my own army. Agus was pleased, unsurprisingly. Soln, though? Soln understood. It knew I wasn't finished speaking.

"For the duration of the fight, the three of you will be under the command of Lord Soln," I said. "To be deployed as it judges necessary depending on how the fronts unfold. Unless I give an order otherwise, Soln's words are good as mine."

That they liked a lot less, save for Soln, since it was the closest I'd ever come to raising one of them above the others. They'd have to get used to it, I thought. This was not the last large-scale battle we'd fight, and some order would have to be forced onto our manner of warfare.

"Honour was given, Losara Queen," the Lord of Shallow Graves smiled.

"You know my intent," I simply said. "See it done."

It wasn't a coincidence I'd picked those four. Soln had the closest thing to battlefield acumen there was to be found in my pack of warlords while Lovre and Vadimry had led raiding sigils. Their Mighty were the most battle-hardened I had at my disposal, and the most used to fighting in a group. Agus would be a weak link wherever it was sent, but putting it on the roster would allow Soln to send warm bodies into a growing mess without committing my best troops.

"Lord Ivah," I finally said.

"My queen," the Lord of Silent Steps replied, inclining its head.

"You'll be with Archer and myself," I said. "We're taking the Pit front."

"By your will," Ivah smoothly replied.

I gave them a last look.

"They'll remember today," I said. "What part of that story you end up being is up to you, my lords."

They bowed, and to war we went.

—

They army marched together most of the way before splitting up front by front, sneaking through mud and reeds. We stayed out of sight, as much as could be done on largely open grounds, and my own sigil was the last to part with the reserve under Lord Soln. I came out of that journey pleasantly surprised. I'd never considered drow to be proper soldiery, but this kind of business was well suited to their skills and I'd underestimated them in some ways. Oh, I still winced at the idea of them in a shield wall. But the march we'd just done in an hour would have taken half a day for legionaries. Even dzulu could keep up a pace that would exhaust humans and orcs for hours without tiring, and they'd walked across mud like it was solid stone. Never a step missed, or a boot

stuck in a mire. More interestingly, they'd done this so quietly I could hardly believe they were an army on the march. My Peerage would be a threat on the battlefield, but I was beginning to grasp how dangerous lesser Mighty and dzulu could be out of it. They climbed up slopes like spiders, leapt from stone to stone with the grace and easy of hunting cats.

How hard would they find it to climb a wall in the dead of night?

But those, I told myself, were thoughts for another day. Ivah guiding our warriors, we circled around the eastern fronts to get to ours unannounced. Going through the territories of sigils would have been quicker, but also risked skirmish. I did not want to start spending lives before we even got to the Flowing Gardens. The war had begun without us, it was plain to hear. The sounds of fighting carried across the void and echoed, making it hard to tell who was winning – if anyone at all – but it was too early in the day for anyone to be trying for knockout blows. For now the sigils would tentatively send out their lower ranks to probe the waters, hesitant to commit their most powerful Mighty until they had a better idea of what the opposition had brought. The main force of the Rumena should be busy taking over the central district, too, with only traitors and hunting bands out on most the other fronts. Save, I had guessed, the very front I was headed towards. Here they would want to break the core of the coalition early, before wind could touch its sails and they got a real battle on their hands. Still, with a little luck the fighting here would be limited between the two sides while the undecided local sigils watched on.

As it turned out, I was not going to get lucky.

My sigil crept through the mud quietly until we reached what now looked like a stone wall but must have once been the edge of a constructed island. Ivah had been ordered to lead us to the outermost edge of the district, close to one of the smaller sluice gates, and it had delivered. Its days spent marauding in the dark had given it a good notion of Great Strycht's layout. I left my warriors at the bottom of the wall, going ahead with Archer and Ivah. The masonry here was fine and the stones polished by centuries of water, but I would have been able to climb this without too much trouble even before I'd become the Squire. We went up without a sound, Indrani disdaining my offer of a palm to jump off of in favour of a running leap. The top of the wall was a long rock pier, flanked by a structure where the sluice gate could be raised or closed, but it wasn't either of those that drew our attention. The sound here hadn't carried well, I decided, probably because all the sectioned parts and the ponds had broken it up. But now that we were up here, we had a decent look at the battle unfolding in the Flowing Gardens and it was a fucking mess.

"I'm counting at least eight sides," Indrani murmured, kneeling behind a large stone cleat.

"More," Ivah said. "Some sigils have yet to intervene. You can see their lookouts lurking at the edges of the fighting."

It discretely pointed a finger and I followed the direction. Yeah, it was right. I could make out the silhouettes hiding within giant glowing ferns. I hesitated,

just for a moment, because the place was a bloody nightmare. It was hard to tell where sigils began and where they ended: every islet was a melee, most fought between several sigils. There were two pairs of warbands going at each other with what *had* to be rylleh that I knew for a fact weren't part of the coalition. They'd just... seen an opportunity, I supposed. The Rumena I could make out from the rest, mostly because they were slightly organized and winning most their fights. Either they'd come with some of their finest, I thought, or their lower ranks of Mighty were heads and shoulders above everyone else's. It took me a few moments to figure out who was leading their expedition, since their forces were split. But near the southern edge of the Flowing Gardens there was a warband of maybe two hundred drow everyone was avoiding like the plague, and a triumvirate of Mighty positively reeking of Night that stood atop an islet while overlooking the mess. I got confirmation of my suspicions when one of them faced down and spoke at one of its warriors, a runner leaving immediately towards one of the detached Rumena warbands.

These were their officers, then.

"Archer," I said. "Find a perch."

"Gotcha," she shrugged. "At will?"

"Try to draw in the bystanders," I said. "Clip their lookouts, see if that gets them moving. After that..."

"Yes ma'am your queenliness," she grinned.

She legged it, already stringing her bow as she went.

"Ivah, reach out to our beloved allies," I said. "I don't want to get in a brawling match with the people we're supposed to be propping up."

"As you say, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured. "And after?"

"Return to the sigil," I said. "I'll be busy making friends."

That got a hard grin out of it, all teeth and malice. *You learned that from us*, I thought, and it almost troubled me. We were not teaching the drow kind lessons, and one that there would be a reckoning for that. It vanished into thin air, the glamour fine enough even I lost track of it, and slowly I rose to my feet. I looked down at my awaiting warriors, still at the foot of the wall.

"Over the top," I ordered. "Forward, Losara Sigil."

Even as they began to climb behind me, I cast an eye at the Rumena officers. Good, they hadn't noticed me yet. Time to make my entrance. I let Winter loose and smiled, inhaling deep of the smell of blood and fear wafting from the battlefield.

Chapter 74

Eyewall

> "My husband thought himself a cynic for believing that men so often race towards the bottom of the barrel. I found it charmingly idealistic that he believed there was a bottom at all."
>
> Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

Leaving the gate open wasn't an option, not really. The more my opposition saw that trick in action, the higher the chances they'd figure out how to counter it. Rubies to piglets there was some Night equivalent to the Pilgrim's miraculous beam o'death, and I could not afford to be knocked out of the battle literally moments into it. I'd adjusted my tactics accordingly, and so after five heartbeats I closed the opening. Gravity and mass turned the water into a massive hammer blow coming down on the Rumena, but I wasn't dealing with amateurs: of the three 'officers', two immediately fled in shadow form and the third was swallowed by a hulking shape of Night moments before the impact. Neither would have been a bad answer, if water was all I'd brought to the table. Instead I strung Winter and loosed it again, turning the entire ploughing mass into ice just as if fell on the drow. There'd been two hundred of them, when I'd opened the gate. The vast majority of that had been dzulu, and those died instantly when the water hit. The lesser Mighty were crushed by the ice, and the two officers who'd fled in shadow form found themselves stuck in it.

The last, though, I knew to be untouched. The Night construct had taken the impact without flinching, and was now tearing its way out. It'd been too much to hope for to take out the enemy commanders with the first blow even if it'd been a sneak attack. Didn't mean I was going to make it easy on them, though. Even as my sigil flowed around me, heading into the fray without a single battle cry, I seized the reins of the ice I'd crafted and slapped my palms together. The entire construct contracted around the Night-shrouded drow at the centre and I felt its defense flinch. My lips stretched into a grim smile when I realized I'd forced the other two officers back into drow-form as a side

effect, bloodying them in the process. There was another pulse of power and the Night-construct began pushing back. I could make this a slugging match, I thought, but that would be missing the point. I didn't want to annihilate the Rumena, I wanted to drive them back to the central district after weakening them. Their sigil was, after all, a part of the force I intended to put between myself and the Longstride Cabal.

Another exertion of will had the ice collapsing into mist, a thick fog that would blind them for a while. Good enough that I could move on, I decided.

A quick glance told me that the Losara Sigil had added a fresh current to the mess in the Flowing Gardens but hardly affected the entire lay of the battle. At our angle of entry, we were taking the pressure off one of the coalition sigils – making a semi-stable line of battle on the northwestern side. I didn't intend to meddle there, since Ivah had been ordered to return and drive away any Mighty that were too much for them to handle. No, I'd go make friends of my own. The half-dozen islets in the middle were so chaotic a melee I couldn't even tell exactly who was fighting, but to the northeast a Rumena detachment was tearing through a mix of sigils both 'neutral' and allied. A good place to start. Wings of shining light burst out of my back and I took flight, rising above the mess to hurry things along. I went high to avoid distractions, but even then I still had to dive out of the way of a javelin roiling with Night some Mighty tossed in my direction. I could have batted it away, but why take the risk with a trick I didn't know? My brow rose, however, when after arcing a dozen feet above me the javelin finished the curve and flew in my pursuit. Someone had it out for me, huh.

Evidently I'd made an impression.

I was quicker than the projectile, so I was less than worried, but I slowed my flight to allow it to catch up. Not close enough to hit, or even explode if that was how that was supposed to end, but close enough the Mighty controlling it might think it had a chance to clip me. I angled my flight downwards after reaching the battlegrounds I'd picked out, javelin howling behind me, and landed in a crouch. The two Mighty in front of me, who'd been hacking at each other with obsidian blades, paused and turned towards me.

"Surprise," I said, and turned into mist.

I took solid form again half a dozen feet to the side, just in time to see the javelin strike them. It did not, to my surprise, explode. In the heartbeat where it hung in the air between them, tendrils of Night came boiling out and wrapped around to the Mighty. Almost instantly they were dragged into the projectile, leaving behind only half-finished screams. No trace of a corpse. Whoever had tossed that, I thought, wasn't fucking around. I checked if there was another flying towards me just in case, but there was nothing coming so I pressed on. It wasn't difficult to find the Rumena: I just had to follow the screaming and the runners. A crew of four stood in a loose diamond formation, steadily advancing through the opposition. I ran through the melee, drow parting around me cautiously, and leapt on the one at the front. Even as I swung my sword towards

its throat I saw it begin to turn, surprise passing in its silver eyes, and I could tell exactly when it realized it wouldn't be able to raise its own sword in time. And yet there was no fear to be found. I learned why a moment later, when the strike that should have carved through its throat instead shattered my blade. It'd been like throwing an egg at a wall, I thought.

It countered smoothly, blade coming down to hack between my shoulder and throat, but I kicked at its side and used the momentum to throw myself backwards. The tip of the iron blade came within an inch of my nose as I landed on my feet, and immediately I pushed forward. I couldn't allow the four of them to strike in formation, it was bound to get messy. Shifting its footing skillfully the drow began a backswing. Unfortunately for it, I slid down between its leg and grabbed its left ankle as I did. Hoisting it up was easy as lifting a feather, and I rose even as the other three Rumena watched me with visible surprise.

"Look," I said. "It's just *really* hard finding a weapon that won't break. Bear with it."

"You-" the Mighty at the back started, Night blooming around its wrists, but it was interrupted.

I took my angrily flailing mace and smashed it into another drow. Bones crunched, though they snapped back into place with a hiss – jawor, then, since they had more than a single good trick – and the drow went flying. The other flanking Rumena tried to slide around and ram my back with a spear, but I caught my drow-weapon by the throat and used it as a loudly protesting shield. The spear pinged off like it'd hit steel, just in time for me to sidestep two hissing whips of Night wielded by the fourth. They snaked back around towards me, but I batted away their tips with my drow after releasing its throat. My mace screamed in pain as the Night punctured its flesh, dropping its sword. In a show of good drow sportsmanship, my disruption of the Rumena advance was followed by an opportunistic attack from other sigils. The left side of their force was swarmed by an angry sigil so thin on Mighty it must have taken a brutal beating before I arrived. Sadly, drow opportunism applied to everyone. An arrow flew at my back, the head of it glinting with shadow, and I had to pivot so my mace could take it in my place after I seized it by the crook of the neck. Heat licked at my fingers as the arrow failed to pierce through but dark flames charred the Mighty's skin.

I was kind of impressed it hadn't passed out yet.

My drow weapon was beginning to try wrestling my wrist into loosening, so our love affair had sadly come to an end. I crouched low and spread out my stance, heaving it in the same direction the arrow had come from. Halfway through it flicked into shadow-shape, but to my amusement our friend with the bow shot it and it fell to the ground with a scream. Well, no longer my problem for now. The Rumena had identified me as the person whose head needed to be on a pike before they got their footing back in this section, so I found myself swimming in Mighty soon enough. We played for a while, my frown deepening as we did. They were outclassed against me, but the longer I got them striking

at each other by weaving into their midst the more I realized these were bottom feeders as far as Mighty went. Maybe there were a few jawor in there, but not a single rylleh. Most of those were ispe, the lowest kind of Mighty, with maybe a few pravnat – practically speaking those were just ispe showing promise, but drow were touchy about titles – thrown into the mix. But they'd been wrecking the opposition, and I could see why. My own sigil had ispe, and the Rumena Sigil's made them look like bumbling amateurs. The fact that I'd yet to fight dzulu here was telling, too. I'd been told that the Rumena made up almost a third of Strycht on their own, but I hadn't though they had quite that many Mighty to spare.

The quality of the opposition was going to be a problem, if these were their third-stringers.

As if to reinforce the point, I got a lesson in why Mighty Rumena had judged that three officers were enough to take care of this front. Three falling stars impacted the battlefield, less than a breath of delay between them, and as stone and drow went flying the Mighty I'd ambushed earlier made their entrance. Steam drifted off their frames as they rose in unison, unbothered by the fact that most casualties resulting from their landing had been of their own sigil. The Night construct from earlier flared, and I finally got a good look at it. It looked like stylized panther, though one vaguely humanoid and standing on it forelegs, and its eyes were empty socket. I could feel the power coming off of that, and to be frank I did not want to find out what'd happen if I got hit with it. The other two advanced with long tridents of bones held in loose grips, fanning out in a circle. I could fight them, I thought. The collateral damage from it would hurt their sigil more than anyone else's. But I'd already accomplished what I'd come for, disrupting their success in this sector. There was little to gain from an all-out brawl with these three.

"Well put," I said, "But if I may retort?"

I opened a gate behind me and retreated through it. The cold breeze of Arcadia scattered my hair as I strode across the waters of what had once been Lake Strycht, ice forming under my feet. I cast a look back to see if they were following, and to my pleasure they were. I quickened my steps as the followed in hot pursuit, one of them stretching out its shadow for the others to walk on as if it were a solid thing. The exit gate beckoned, and I called it open with a thought before leaping through. The one we'd entered through was already closing, so my pursuers wasted no time in following suit.

All four of us started falling, because why would I make the gate lead to the ground when I could *fly*?

Wings burst out of my back again and I left for greener pastures as they fell impotently back to the floor, landing in the middle of the bloody central melee. None of them would die from it, but they'd be stuck in another fight they had no time for. Another arrow flew towards me, this one without Night woven into it, and I almost struck back blindly where it'd come from. Luckily I glanced first, and found it'd been Archer who'd fired the shot. Frowning, I

crafted a platform of shadow under my feet and landed. Indrani was, rather unsurprisingly, surrounded by corpses. It'd take too long to make my way to her, so I closed my eyes and took a shortcut.

—

The corpse rose, the lingering warmth chased away by Winter coursing through the veins. Archer eyed me skeptically, nocking an arrow.

"Cat?" she asked.

I spat out a glob of blood and phlegm.

"You have my attention," I croaked out.

"Left corner, three sigils massing," she said. "Tickled their lookouts, but they're playing the waiting game even under provocation. Should I start shooting leadership or do we leave them be?"

The dead drow's neck was horridly stiff, but I forced it to turn with a snap and followed her pointed finger. Couldn't make it out from here, I wasn't high up enough, but from up in the sky it'd be no trouble.

"I'll handle it," I said. "You should- oh *shit!*"

—

Height was no guarantee of safety, in a fight like this, even if my distraction lasted only a few moments. I didn't see what broke my platform but it vaporized my right foot with it and I began falling again until my wings slowed it to a halt. Which was exactly what my enemies wanted, as it happened. If it'd been the three Rumena from earlier going after me that'd have been fair game, but it wasn't: four Mighty from a sigil I was pretty sure I was theoretically allied with stood atop long pillars of Night and were forming a globe of the same around me.

"*Really*?" I said. "Fine. Have it your way."

I snuffed out my wings, opened a gate under me and fell right through. Arcadian air howled around me and I crashed into the water, ripping open a gate under me. The sudden whirlpool drew me in and I fell along with a mass of water more or less over the sigils Archer had pointed out to me. Streaks of shadow immediately flew up but a flick of the wrist had the water around me turning into a large spike of ice I casually tossed into the midst of the gathering warriors. I landed among screams and fleeing dzulu, brushing off my shoulders. The sigil-holders would be on me soon, but my eyes were drawn to the corpses I'd just made. There was Night in them, though like with all dzulu not much of it, but it was fading. Going away, and I could quite say where. I tugged at the chain binding Diabolist to me, allowing her to see through my eyes. I felt the trace of her presence come, lingering only a few moments before disappearing. She tugged back one, a message received. Had she already known? Quite possible, if this was happening all over the city instead of just here. Then the Mighty were on me, and the time for musings had passed.

Three sigil-holders, each with a pair of rylleh backing them. Difficult to deal with, if I'd intended on fighting them. Instead I tossed a few spears of ice at them to get them riled up and began a retreat. They followed, and our merry

chase began. I could have called the Flowing Gardens the stuff fairy dreams were made of, but I'd *had* fairy dreams – and this was much more surreal. We danced through canals where vines had grown thick and sprouted thorns and hooks, bursting through faded poems carved into stone. Tortured sculptures of bronze and obsidian sang dissonantly as shards of Night were tossed, stirred by the wind in their wake, and towering trees whose only produce were leaves red like blood shook as Mighty rode shadows in my pursuit. A sluice gate of oily metal was torn open like parchment as I leapt over it on translucent wings, the sigil-holder who'd done it looking like a creature of nightmare in the light of the glowing flowers and ferns it'd torn through in its haste. And everywhere we went, drow fought and ambushed and bled on stone and water. There were Hells, I thought, not even half as grim as this. I stoked their anger with darting strikes followed by vanishing into mist, clipping a few with ice spears to little more effect that mounting frustration on their part.

They didn't realize what I was doing until we'd barrelled into the central melee, and by then it was too late.

It was such a mess down here that another few Mighty in the crowds hardly made a difference, the fight ebbing for a moment before forming anew around them, and just like that my job was done. The Rumena were losing here now, though the situation was slowly turning around as the warriors from the section I'd flipped earlier joined up with their fellows. It must have gone quite badly there after I'd left for them to outright abandon the fight. Good. The cauldron was near the boiling point, a little more and they'd be ready. In my absence, the Losara Sigil had pushed deep. Moving as a cordon along with our allies, it was moving slowly but surely towards this mess. Seeing my sigil's symbol as war paint and adornment was surprisingly moving, but it ended up costly. By now, my identity was no mystery to the people I'd tangled with. And if they couldn't pin me down themselves, then there *was* one way they could force a fight.

Three falling stars hit my sigil, and in the span of a single heartbeat I lost at least two hundred warriors.

Gone, in a shred of flesh and bone and stone dust. People it had taken me months to bind and empower, dead in the snap of a finger. I clenched my fingers, pushing down my fury. War could not be waged without losses. I rose in the sky and dived for them, deciding that gating close to them was too much of a risk. In the time it took me to arrive, I lost another hundred drow. The Rumena officers slaughtered them with contemptuous ease, be they dzulu or Mighty, and only ceased when I landed at their back. I rolled my shoulder, weaving a glamour without missing a beat.

"All right," my illusion said. "You got me here. Now what?"

"The worthy take," one of them said. "The worthy rise, Losara Queen."

I circled around them, footsteps muted, but one of them must have had a trick to see through that because the two with bone tridents ignored my glamour and turned towards me. The Night construct erupted for a third time

tonight, the blind panther roaring out, and they charged. There was, of course, one thing they hadn't accounted for. The leftmost drow ducked under an arrow, batting it aside, but there'd been a second shot hidden in the curve of the first and that one took it in the throat. It gurgled, unsurprisingly still alive, but then its throat began burning green. Indrani had spent quite a while with Robber and his miscreants, hadn't she? She'd been due a few new tricks. That one I immediately discounted as dead, flesh reknitting or not, and that left me two to deal with. Or it would have, if Ivah hadn't cut into the dance. My Lord of Silent Steps moved with unnatural agility, waiting until the bone trident had struck out before... moving. The description failed to convey what had taken place, though. One moment it'd been standing in the way of the weapon, the next it'd been behind the Mighty and striking with its own glass staff. Afterimages followed a heartbeat later, revealing how it had moved and the whole affair reeked of Winter.

It'd skimmed the edge of Arcadia, I realized with a start.

Move along the boundary between it and Creation, steps silent and sudden until struck. Merciless Gods, *I* couldn't do that. Was it the true face of its title? Or was it just better at using power, after its centuries as a rylleh? It'd didn't matter, I thought, at least not right now. Its opponent was far from dead, even after taking the blow, and I still had one to contend with. The shaped Night pounced, carrying the drow within as if it were lodged in the belly, and if I'd not batted wings to hurry my retreat it would have hit me. As it was, the panther's claws tore through the stone beneath us and it turned to face with as its tail swung. As suspected, I did not want to get touched by any part of this. The thing was, I couldn't really afford a slugging match with a rylleh when I was supposed to be getting this cookpot off the fire. Not even an obviously powerful one. There was a part of me that found it only natural to get down in the mud and brawl, but I couldn't afford to fight that way anymore. Not with the kind of opponents I had, these days.

I'd done it at the Battle of the Camps, and what had that gotten me? Nothing I'd done there had actually mattered until the gate had been opened, and the Saint of Swords had batted me around until I fled. Keter had been more of the same, struggling through one messy gambit after another while a dead elf and a Horned Lord made sport of my best efforts. All this had happened while the fucking Dead King as good as named me a peer, while he'd be able to handle those matters easy as picking apples. Not because he was more powerful, because terrifying as Neshamah was Winter's abyss ran just as deep. But because he knew how to use that power, while I muddled along using only the barest portion of mine. *Akua* was better at using these powers than I was, and she didn't even have a title. So what did I have that neither of them did? Because that was the question, wasn't it? If I was going to sit at the same table as Sve Noc and the King of Death, then I needed to prove I had the qualifications to claim a seat. Catherine Foundling, the woman who brawled with rylleh and lost limbs by the dozens before finally putting it down, did not have those

qualifications.

I looked at the Night construct, watched its legs bend as it prepared to pounced, and I shaped it in my mind. I'd never done it simultaneously before, but why couldn't I? Maybe I wouldn't have been able as the Squire, but the Squire was dead. Devoured by a harsher mantle. *How many of my limitations*, I thought, *are self-inflicted?* I could be mist or hard as steel, I could grow wings and walk away from the loss of half my body. Lies and mirrors, and what was this but a different kind of lie? The panther skimmed across the ground, unnaturally swift, and I let Winter flow into me. Fill my veins and my lungs, steal away my breath. I embraced it, as I had in Liesse, and formed what I had shaped in my mind's eye. The first gate opened in front of the Night construct, and it slowed by a fraction as it prepared to leap over it. That was enough. Another two, caging it in a triangle. Another two, above and below. All of them leading to the bottom of the Fields of Wend, that depthless glacier lake at the very heart of Winter. How many miles of water were there in it? I didn't know, not for sure. But water came out from all sides, and in a heartbeat Night and drow were crushed like a bug by the gargantuan pressure. I breathed out and the gates closed as one, leaving behind only water and flesh made into paste.

No, Catherine Foundling had no place at that table. But maybe the Black Queen did.

I looked back, found the battle had gone on uncaring of what'd just taken place. Just another current in the sea. It was time to get them moving, I thought. Soon enough the Rumena would have taken the central district, and the madness in Great Strycht needed to be brought to its climax. I couldn't get all these drow moving with my own power, it was true. It'd take hours to go around killing every sigil-holder and asserting command, assuming it was even possible at all. But I'd been taught by a man who had been an artist in the ways or ruling through fear, and his lessons had not all gone to waste.

"Retreat," I called out to my sigil. "As planned."

I left them to the grisly business of disengaging from a furious melee while I reached for my power one last time. Terribilis the Second had once said that a threat was useless unless you'd previously committed the level of violence you were threatening to use. I didn't agree, though, not exactly. It was useless if the level of violence you were threatening wasn't believable, I'd say instead. And I'd stolen a lake in front of these people, used it as a weapon and bribe both. They would believe quite a bit, coming from me. Even as my sigil began fleeing towards the heart of Great Strycht, to the surprise of their foes, I wove a glamour. A gate facing upwards, and through it came a deafening rumble. Illusory molten stone flew out, landing on the muddy lakebed and the edge of the Flowing Gardens, smoke and lava following as the glamoured volcano erupted in full.

The Losara Sigil fled, and every godsdamned drow in the north followed close behind.

Chapter 75

The Eye

> "There is more power in blood spilled willingly than unwillingly. The latter is simply a great deal easier to obtain."
>
> Dread Emperor Sorcerous

I would have compared it to herding cats, but as far as I knew those didn't take time in the middle of a rout to backstab allies or enemies, depending on who didn't watch their back closely enough. Well, maybe Praesi cats. You never knew with Wastelanders. I kept the drow moving even after we'd cleared the area that was being affected by the 'volcano' by more or less stomping out any knot of bravery that formed. After the second time Mighty who tried to stand their ground and rally their warriors got a gate opened above their heads the message was received. I was sinking into Winter at a prodigious rate, no to ways around it, but nowadays I had more than just Akua to dump the principle alienation into. Twelve hardened former Mighty on top of Diabolist meant I could keep this up for quite a while without going all monologue-addicted, and if it came down to it I could try to disperse some of it into the drow who'd simply taken oaths. There were shards of Winter in them as well, after all, put there to enforce the terms. It didn't quite feel like I'd be breaking our bargain if I did that, but somehow I suspected it was close enough I wouldn't like the ensuing backlash. A desperate measure, if need be, but not to be used before that.

The front we'd named the Pit was effectively finished, the chaos within being poured into the dawning mess at the centre of Great Strycht, but while fighting there I'd taken my eye off the two fronts to the east. There were risks in that, which was I'd put Lord Soln in command of the reserve to hedge my bets. It had authority to intervene as it deemed necessary to keep the wagon on the road. It was about time to see how that'd worked out. I remained with the retreat until we reached the outskirts of the central district before putting Ivah and Archer in charge of the situation and dismissing the glamour and taking flight. The false sky of the cavern was mercifully unburdened by fighting, and the height allowed me to gauge how the situation was unfolding over the

entire city. There'd been two battles planned in the east, fronts named Spear and Dice. The former I wasn't overly worried about, since the Jindrich would be taking the lead there and their sigil-holder was infamously destructive. The latter was a different story, as it involved a cabal of four sigils informally led by the Hushu, which presumably weren't in on any of the plots coming to a head. If they pushed into the other eastern front, that whole section of the city would become a massive melee I lacked the tools to properly handle.

Considering the 'plan' for the Battle of Great Strycht was to drive everyone and their genderless sibling into the centre before the Longstrides arrived, there was a lot riding on Lord Soln's ability to cope with the situation.

What I took in from above was a mixed bag. The reinforcing Peerage I'd sent to back up the Jindrich had been enough to punch through the delaying force sent by the Rumena on the Spear front, by the looks of it. They were in full retreat, harassed by coalition and Peerage drow as they made for the centre. Considering the amount of Peers I'd sent east I was rather surprised it was harassment and not annihilation I was looking at, but the explanation was not difficult to find. The Hushu and their allies had taken the field and decided to be clever about it. Instead of launching a hard assault that would see my Peerage diverted from the pursuit to deal with the situation, they were marauding around the flanks and striking fast before withdrawing. The Peers and sigil-holders in command were hesitating, reluctant to allow the Rumena to retreat unimpeded when the Hushu attacks were so lukewarm. The three lords I'd assigned to that front had gone with the understanding that containment was their main objective, so they were tacitly allowing it to happen even if it thinned their ranks. Presumably judging that the overall losses would be greater if we fully engaged. The reserve under Lord Soln was closer to the centre, in an incline between two islands-turned-hills, and so hidden from view. There'd been four sigils assigned to the reserve, before hostilities erupted, but only two were still hidden down there: the Soln and the Agus, so at least the overall commander was there to answer my questions.

Instead of staying up there and drawing attention, I landed next to the reserve and dismissed my wings. The drow parted around me, many of them bowing as I passed, and I returned the gesture with a silent nod. The Lord of Shallow Graves awaited me with Lord Agus at its side, gravely listening to dzulu giving reports. The conversation died as I strode in, the two Peers inclining their heads in deference.

"Losara Queen," Lord Soln said. "I heard word of your success to the north."

"Drew in everyone I could and sent them running into the central melee," I agreed. "I'm more interested in the situation around here. Have the Hushu and their cabal declared for a side?"

"Their own, presumably," Lord Agus sighed.

"They attacked the coalition and the Rumena both," Soln calmly replied. "Though with the retreat of the Rumena, we are now the only blood left to be shed."

"I take it you've something in the works," I said, glancing around pointedly.

There were, after all, two missing sigils.

"I sent the lords Lovre and Vadimyr to circle around Hushu positions," Lord Soln agreed.

"That'll open another front," I pointed out. "Instead of push them into the centre, which is what we're actually after."

"So I said, Losara Queen," Lord Agus muttered. "So I said."

"I intend to launch an assault myself as they do, my queen," Soln explained. "Along the ridges of the southeast."

I frowned, trying to remember what I'd seen of the battlefield from above. It would make a corner connected to a line that led straight to the centre, more or less, if you counted the forces currently pursuing the Rumena. If I had to guess at the intent, it'd be forcing Hushu and friends to head towards the centre to avoid being assaulted from two sides. If we'd been fielding a disciplined army I would have given it decent odds of working out as Soln wanted, forcing movement through pressure, but as it was we'd be compounding a gamble with another gamble. *And even if it works out, we're wedging the Hushu and their allies in between the Losara Sigil and the rest of our forces*, I thought. Considering my sigil had already taken harsh losses at the hands of the Rumena, if the Hushu went all-out against them they might outright collapse. That'd be... bad. Without my own forces out there to stoke the fire, there was a decent chance the 'neutral' sigils there would rally and retreat rather than remain participants in the bloody melee. Soln, I thought, had good instincts. But it was trying to fight with an army we didn't have, and its core mistake was trying to maintain control over a situation that was already too chaotic to handle.

"How long ago did Lovre and Vadimyr set out?" I asked.

"Less than half an hour," Lord Agus said.

"Right, so we've still got time to manoeuvre," I frowned. "All right, here's what we'll do. The entire force holding back the Hushu and their cabal is to collapse immediately and flee towards the centre."

The two drow stiffened with surprise.

"The casualties-" Lord Soln delicately began.

"Will sting, I know," I said. "But your way is as likely to lead in a slugging match we can't afford as it is to drive them to the centre. So instead of forcing them, we'll bait them. That many sigils in a rout? They'll come after them with everything they have, eager for the harvest."

"And we are to simply look upon the situation and wait?" Lord Agus asked, with what I suspected to be a hopeful tone.

Not the fiercest of fighters, this one.

"No," I said. "You two and the two sigils Lord Soln sent out are to attack them from behind once they've committed."

I paused, meeting the Lord of Shallow Graves' blue eyes.

"Lord Soln, force them into the centre," I said. "With everything you have."

The drow softly laughed.

"And I believed myself to be ruthless," it said. "It will be as you say, Queen of Lost and Found."

Lord Agus was a lot less sanguine about essentially throwing both our 'allies' and several of our sigils into a boiling broth, but kept its dismay largely off its face.

"Will you be accompanying us in this, Losara Queen?" it asked.

"Sadly, I suspect I'll be needed elsewhere," I said.

If only because the last thing I wanted was to be surrounded by my own warriors when the Longstride Cabal showed up.

"Do either of you know where Mighty Jindrich is?" I continued.

"The Rumena angered it enough it grew wroth before they were driven back," Lord Soln said. "It was last seen heading out in their pursuit, its mind lost to rage."

"Find the largest concentration of wreckage and corpses, it shall not be far," Lord Agus noted.

"And Mighty Rumena?" I asked.

"Has yet to take the field against us," Soln said. "Though there is word it might have participated in the taking of the central district. It is largely under that sigil's control by now."

"So the dance awaits me in the middle," I mused. "Fitting. Lord Soln, I trust you'll be able to carry out your orders here?"

"That much I can promise," the Lord of Shallow Graves smiled.

"Then wade in their blood, my lord," I said, and translucent wings burst out of my back.

I was thousands of miles away from any orc, but their traditional farewell had hardly ever been more appropriate. I shot back up into the sky and wasted no time before heading out towards the front we'd named the Woods. That district had been the centre of ancient Great Strycht in senses more numerous than the geographical one, even a swift glance made that clear. It was a labyrinth of temples and great halls, each its own little island surrounded by a deep canal and tied to others structures by curved bridges and arches of stone. The sheer vividness of it startled me, for until now I'd seen drow tastes run towards mostly colours grey and dark. Here though, strange and half-faded patterns of blue, red and white covered every surface. Orange and gold served as the colour of the sky in sprawling mosaics where the moon was depicted as a feathered wheel of white-tipped red, the stylized heads of snakes and drow gazing down at the bloodletting from every corner. The depredations of time and abandonment were easy to find, collapsed roofs not since repaired and broken walls serving as makeshift doors, but I was surprised to see some of the paints had been freshly touched up.

Some of those mosaics were splattered with greyish red, though, and that wasn't paint.

A square tower with colourful turrets on the corners burst open at the base, and just like that I'd found Mighty Jindrich. The drow was massive, the largest of its kind I'd ever seen, and covered from head to toe in a featureless carapace of pure Night. I watched, reluctantly impressed, as its fingers sunk into the sides of the same tower it'd just ripped up and it repeatedly smashed the whole thing down on a pair of Mighty until there was nothing left but bloody paste. Then it tossed the whole thing into a temple and screamed monstrously before leaping into another fight. This was, I thought, my primary ally in this battle. I sure knew how to pick them. I was almost distracted enough that I didn't see the javelin coming, but not quite. There were fires all over the district and trails of smoke going up into the sky, but as the projectile sailed through a large plume I caught sight of the stir it caused and dipped below with a bat of my wings. I raised a brow when I realized there was no hint of power in the toss, save in how far it'd been thrown, and that even if I'd not moved it would likely have missed me. Had some enterprising dzulu decided to bag queen and glory with the same throw?

I'd be sure to praise their guts, before the messy retaliatory murder.

I flew around the plume of smoke and found where it should have come from, eyes landing on a single drow standing atop one of the tallest towers in the district. That was strike one. Even far as I was I could make out the looks of it. It was, well, old. Its grey skin was deeply creased, its pitch-black veins visible through it and though tall it had grown visibly stooped. It held no weapon, attired in a strange belted tunic of obsidian rings. Almost like mail, I thought. Its hair was long and white, going down almost to its waist. That was strike two. Its dim silver eyes met mine all the way across the distance, as if it could see me just as well, and I could not feel a single speck of power from it. That was strike three, and so the drow might as well have 'dangerous, take caution' tattooed glaring red on its forehead. It did not attack a second time, simply waiting. *Not an attack*, I corrected. *A way to grab my attention.* My eyes dipped to the large cloth belt it wore, and the Crepuscular I read on that only confirmed what I was already suspecting. Wings narrowing behind me as I dove, I landed smoothly in front of the Mighty Rumena.

Mantle of Woe fluttering as I rose to my full height – which was, rather unfairly I felt, still shorter than the bent old drow – my wings folded behind me. I wasn't dismissing those before I got a clear idea of what was taking place here. I'd read a lot of faces, in my time. I'd watched humanity slide off my teacher's true face like water off clay, the utter blankness of fae bereft of stories. Shades of contempt by the dozen, angers both principled and personal, too many flavours of hatred to count. Irritation from creatures considering me an insolent child, pity from the likes of the Grey Pilgrim and even casual dismissal from the Saint of Swords. Mighty Rumena stood out from that multitude, because all there was in its gaze was attention. Pure and unfettered, as if the weight of it left no place for anything else. It was uncomfortable, to have someone take in all of me so deeply. It didn't feel like scrutiny, and I realized the

source of my unease a moment later. I'd seen that look in another pair of eyes: Masego's, when he'd come into his aspect in Arcadia. When he'd witnessed it all with impossible clarity.

"Mighty Rumena," I said. "Your invitation was received."

"Losara Queen," my foe simply greeted me.

It had a calm voice, I thought. Unruffled, unhurried. Like nothing could really affect it. It was old and powerful enough it might not even be wrong about that. It glanced down at the messy fighting below, the screams and blood and fire swallowing up the district.

"I remember this city," Rumena said. "From when it was at its height. The jewel of the south, second only to Tvarigu in beauty. It brings me no pleasure to layer ruin over ruin."

"And yet," I said, "here we are."

"There are only a few of us left, Losara," the Mighty said. "Those who knew this land before Night fell upon it. In Strycht, Jindrich is the only other – and it was young when we lost the wars. Too young to understand the true depth of the loss."

"But you weren't," I said.

If it wanted to talk while my designs unfolded, I had absolutely no objection to that. If we engaged it was going to be the kind of mess that'd make devils blush, and while my forces below weren't winning exactly they were carrying out my plan perfectly. It was hard for them not to, when the entire plan was to create chaos and that was the natural state of the Everdark.

"I was a general, honoured twice for victories won in the Burning Lands by the Twilight Sages themselves," Rumena said. "One of them, I think, against a people whose blood you hold. The look has little changed since those nights."

My fingers tightened. It was implying it'd fought the Deoraithe, at some point, and there was a little problem with that: neither the Kingdom nor the later Duchy of Daoine had ever come under drow assault in recorded history. There was the Golden Bloom in the way, after all. Which meant I was talking to an entity claiming it'd been alive before the elves arrived on Calernia. Three thousand years old, I thought, at least. Gods. It might be the single oldest thing I'd ever met save for the Dead King.

"And now you're a sigil-holder in the remnants of the old empire," I said.

"My army followed me," the Mighty said. "Already they were rylleh and jawor, though the titles had different meaning then. None of them survived the passing of the years. The Night is not a forgiving sacrament."

Sacrament, I thought. Not just a domain, some Name's power manifest. It'd always felt too large, hadn't it? And I had wondered why no drow seemed to be born a mage. This whole time, had I really been looking at an entire people wielding Below's equivalent of Light? Miracles of the darkness, purer in nature than even the stuff devils were made of.

"You saw it happen, then," I said. "What Sve Noc did."

"I knew one of the sisters," Rumena said. "And now know her better still. She is in my blood, in my soul."

Sisters? My eyes narrowed. And it'd called the Sve *her*. There was something significant about that, I thought. A detail I was missing.

"They broke you," I said. "Your entire civilization."

The drow shook its head.

"Not them," Rumena said. "The Twilight Sages, in their wanton arrogance. How tall stood their pedestal and proud they were of it, until the nerezim cast them down. Only then did they regret the height."

My blood ran cold. For a creature that old and powerful to call something *wanton arrogance*, how terrible must it be?

"What did they do?"

"They sought to kill death," the Mighty said. "But leashed it instead. We were to live forever, you see. As gods. And we did, for a time."

The old drow's lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"Then we lost the wars," Rumena said. "And while we raged and wailed of wealth lost, of glories unmade, the wise Sages knew terror. For the nerezim put entire cities to the sword, and our immortality *narrowed*. They had borrowed from what would never be. And with every defeat the debt grew closer to that moment where it could no longer be repaid."

"They didn't make you immortal," I spoke slowly, piecing together what'd been laid out for me to find. "Did they? They stole years from children not yet born. That would never be, because their parents were slain by the dwarves."

It was one of the fundamental laws of sorcery, wasn't it? That you couldn't make something out of nothing. I had not forgotten that glimpsed conversation between Neshamah and the Bard, where she'd implied the Twilight Sages had been mages.

"And so our end loomed, Losara Queen," the Mighty said. "The balance dipped closer to irredeemable disaster with every fallen city. Until the two of them took action."

"The sisters," I said. "They made the Gloom. They made the Night. Before the point of no return was reached."

There was a long moment of silence between us, as the sounds of the slaughter below drifted up to our ears.

"Before?" Mighty Rumena smiled. "O Queen of Lost and Found, did you not come here to rob a corpse?"

I shivered. The old creature laughed.

"Dead, every last one of us," the drow said. "You thought Sve Noc the cause of our ruin, and you were wrong. You thought them the cure to our disease, and you were wrong again. Our most beloved betrayers did not save a single soul. They… delayed."

"It makes no sense," I said. "The Gloom yes, but the Night? It incited slaughter. If instead they'd encouraged childbirth, raised your population, you

might have gotten out of it. You've had centuries to recover since those wars, you could have evened the scales."

"You do not understand," the Mighty said. "It was too late, Losara Queen. *We were already dying*. But those clever sisters, the wicked and the merciful, they struck a bargain."

And I grasped it, then, what it was that I was being told.

"The Night is the only thing keeping any of you alive," I whispered hoarsely. "And the slaughter isn't a mistake or an unforeseen consequence, it's the entire point. Every kill is a sacrifice. Willing. Eager, even. Merciless Gods, Archer was right – this entire realm is an altar."

"The greatest in all of Creation," Rumena said, ruinously proud. "Witness and weep, Losara, the glory of the Firstborn: we alone, of all peoples in the world, have cheated death *twice*."

"But it couldn't last," I said. "You had to have known that. The dwarves were going to come sooner or later and it was all going to fall apart the moment they did."

"The Night was not an answer," the Mighty said. "But it could be understood as a question."

And another part of the puzzle fell into place.

"Apotheosis," I said. "Through brute force. Trying every possible application of power through hundreds of thousands of Mighty so that a path out could be found."

And I had thought myself inelegant, for merely blundering my way into my mantle. The sisters were trying to force the lock by trying every possible key.

"Was it?" I asked. "Did they find a path?"

Pale silver eyes considered me calmly.

"Come now," Rumena said. "Why would the Shrouded Gods grant such a boon, when our base terror kept their altars slick with blood?"

"So they failed," I said. "Rumena, there's another way. I can help with this. We don't need to fight. Winter-"

I bit my tongue.

"You knew that already," I finally said. "And you still struck."

"You are right, Queen of Lost and Found," the Mighty said. "You *can* help with this."

As a sacrifice, one last to finally even the scales. And I'd been a good sport, hadn't I? The Everdark entire might be an altar, but I'd consecrated Great Strycht with thousands of dead just so Sve Noc could properly open my throat over its ashes. Even as my alarm mounted, part of me could not help but admire the game of the Gods Below. They'd played their hand flawlessly, hadn't they? It didn't matter to them whether the drow rose from the dark as the Winter Court reborn in shadow, or if the Priestesses of Night devoured my mantle whole and unleashed madness on Creation as a two-faced goddess. No matter who won, they won as well. That was their way, I was beginning to understand.

They didn't move like Above, trying to force a victory in every fight. They only ever fought when they couldn't lose.

"Why tell me any of this, if we're going to fight?" I asked, warily backing away.

"To give them time to surround us," Mighty Rumena said.

The roof exploded beneath our feet, and the Longstride Cabal entered the fray.

Chapter 76

Storm Surge

"Quite literally not what I was aiming for, but I can work with this."

Dread Empress Regalia II, as her flying fortress began falling on Laure

Why was it always explosions?

Everybody always tried to blow me up. Akua, Pilgrim, too many Summer fae to count. Even William, and he didn't even have powers that made it easy for him – he'd used godsdamned munitions. Was there some manual you got when you became Named that set it out as a preferred tactic? Just once, for diversity's sake, someone should start with fire. Or ice, or even bloody lightning. Sure I'd dabbled in the explosion method myself so some – viper tongues one and all – might call me a hypocrite for complaining, but in my defence this was reaching a point where I'd received a lot more explosions than I'd dealt out. Once more, this savage world of ours was proving to be deeply unjust at its core. I was probably going to be blamed for this too. This tower would prove to be some deeply holy place to the drow, and good ol' Catherine Foundling would be charged with desecration of some fancy Night temple. It was getting as bad as the goblinfire, which for the record I didn't use nearly as often as some people implied. *Thinking of you, Hakram.*

"Would, like, shadow snakes be too much to ask for?" I said. "Sure there's a lot of phallic symbolism involved, but-"

A hole the size of a watermelon formed in my torso, scattering my organs in a shower of gore even as I fell. The Longstrides either had a very dark sense of humour or they weren't the most stirring of conversationalists. There were six – no, seven, one was half-veiled by an illusion of Night – drow below and they went about their assault with calculated professionalism. The explosion that'd made an abstractly-patterned portrait of my insides all over the stone had blown me back towards the wall, where a blanket of shadow was already awaiting me. The acid trick again? Best not to test it out, I decided. My wings were smothered in strands of Night the moment they tried to move and take me

out of freefall, but I had other options. The gate opened under me, and after a few heartbeats of falling through Arcadian sky I gated back out atop the now-roofless tower. Mighty Rumena was still perched at the edge of it, standing unruffled with its hands folded into obsidian-ringlet sleeves. I killed my wings and formed them out again, getting rid of the interfering Night, and landed on the opposite side with largely accidental grace.

"You seem irritated," Rumena noted. "Is your attempted enslavement of my entire race proving too troublesome for your tastes?"

"That one was a fair shot," I conceded. "Are you not taking part in this kill-a-queen festival?"

"Humans," the Mighty sighed. "Such impatient creatures. All in due time, Losara Queen."

I liked to think I wasn't so much of a fool as to fall for the exact same trick twice in a row, so even as we spoke I'd started moving. Just because I'd found seven of the Longstrides so far didn't meant that was all of them. The sudden attack had not been a pleasant surprise, but my plan was still working out at the moment – as made clear by the fact that I'd been ambushed by a small pack, not the full roster of two hundred. I learned why this particular lot had been the vanguard the moment I leapt down to temple's roof a few dozen feet below and to the side, when they smoothly walked out of the shade cast by statues. In a loose circle of which I was the centre. I was going to get surrounded no matter where I went, wasn't I? Shadow-striding, my Peerage had called it. I was kind of a pain I was no longer the only one on the field with an unfair mobility trick.

"So, you're Longstride Cabal," I said. "Are we not even going to have a round of introductions? Pretty rude of you, I have to say."

I didn't have eyes in the back of my head – although I could actually grow those, I'd found out, I still hadn't figured out how to make them function properly – so I could only make out the appearance of the five relatively in front of me. Not unexpectedly, there was little common to their armaments and looks. Most of them were ageless in that way the Mighty were, but there was one looking even older than Rumena and one I'd have called a teenager if not for the too-sharp features. Spears, swords, one had a nifty steel hammer and there was even one wielding some kind of chain with sharp spikes at the end that had to be a nightmare to actually use in a fight. Armour varied from half-naked to a set of full plate in what I was pretty sure was rune-inscribed granite. Tactics were going to be tricky here: the weapons were probably the least dangerous thing about them, but if they still bothered to bring them into a battle it would be with the expectation they'd have some use. The one in plate, which also looked like it'd been made from grey leather left too long out in the sun, was the only one to reply.

"Full account of your deeds will be taken from a follower after the hunt has come to an end, Queen of Lost and Found," the Mighty said. "There is no need to worry they will be forgot after your passing."

"Not exactly what I was getting at," I replied.

There was a soft sound near the back of the roof and I pivoted slightly so that section entered my peripheral vision. My brow rose: Rumena had joined us, making the leap down effortlessly. The Longstrides parted around it, allowing it to stand among the circle surrounding me. Allies? I hadn't thought this lot, or even drow in general, the kind of people to stick to a pact past its immediate purpose being fulfilled.

"You are seen, Rumena Tomb-Maker," the drow in plate said. "Out of respect for your past office, you will not be hunted this night. Depart without strife."

Tomb-Maker, huh. That was the kind of epithet only people you didn't want to fuck with ended up earning. The drow, stooped old creature that it was, straightened its back with a nasty crack.

"Make me," Mighty Rumena said, voice utterly serene.

Damn. Sure, it'd baited me into a pretty bad situation and it was most likely after my head. But I couldn't deny the old monster had *class*.

"Are you sure I can't recruit you?" I felt compelled to ask. "I'll be honest, I would spend good money to see you punch Saint in the face."

"So be it," plated-drow shrugged, flatly ignoring me. "Under auspices red I declare-"

"*Drown*," I shamelessly interrupted, and ripped open my gates.

Three of them shaped like a dome going over all of us. Why not? I had nothing to fear from the waters. And I certainly didn't owe them the courtesy of allowing them to finish whatever murderous ceremonial phrase they'd wanted to speak. It took three heartbeats for the mass of water to hit the rooftop, and by then I was the only one left on it. A thought had the gates closing as the temple under me collapsed, icy waters tearing through the roof with a thunderous crash, and the weight of it had me crushed against the ground beneath. It didn't matter: I formed a globe of ice around myself and gated out heartbeats before some spike of Night ripped through where'd I'd been, leaving Arcadia to tread on the wet grounds outside the temple. I could have gone further out, but the whole point of using the lake-gates as an opening volley had been giving me materials easy to work with. A flick of the wrist had the lakewater turning into mist, billowing out and swallowing our surroundings. I pricked my ears, but could not hear a single one of them moving. Silencing their footsteps was too basic a use of Night for it to have been reasonable to hope otherwise, I conceded, but at least the mist would hinder their vision.

I felt Night flare above and looked up, quietly climbing a large hall's roof to get a better angle, and what I found had me frowning. They'd put us in a box. Using the mist as delineation for the area, one of them had slapped down a rectangular box of roiling Night – with all nine of us presumably inside it. It should be useless, I thought, since I could gate out anytime. But the dawning itch on my skin told a different story. It felt like a ward, or at least something to the same effect. I kept moving, since staying in the same place for too long was bound to get me discovered and then surrounded in swift succession. I glamoured out the sound my footsteps, unwilling to rely on my own limited

sneaking abilities to keep me out of trouble, and dropped in a low crouch when I heard the sound of stone shattering in the distance. I couldn't see anyone, at the moment, so I carefully began heading into that direction to see what'd happened. Had Rumena and the Longstrides begun fighting? I got the answer before I finished making my way there, when a temple to my left was brutally flattened by another massive spike of Night. Ah, they weren't fighting. They were methodically getting rid of anything I could use for cover.

If they kept this up, I'd end up on flat grounds with nothing to manoeuver around. After that, all they needed to do was get rid of the mist and it was all going to eagerly proceed downhill. Clever enemies were the worst, I thought.

Still, I wasn't without an arsenal of my own. I reached for my domain – not to call it down, but to use the substance of it as a tool. *One, two, three*. I continued forging long chains ending in hooks out of Moonless Night, making them come out of my palms, until I had enough of them for every structure I could make out around me. After that it was only a matter of tossing them at the temples and towers and making the hooks sink into them. I broadened my stance, more out of habit than true need, and after grasping all the chains tightly began to turn. My muscles might be make-believe, nowadays, but the strength was real. With one snap after another I ripped out temples and towers, sometimes mere walls but on occasion the whole thing when the foundation was weak enough. With a grunt I put my whole body into it spinning the entire mass of ripped stone like a giant mace. I didn't need to actually find the drow if I hit *everything*. Tearing through other structures slowed the momentum, but I kept spinning and so did my makeshift weapon. Had I hit any of them? Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn't have been able to feel it if I had, given the weight difference. Given the nature of my improvised weapon it wasn't hard for the drow to guess at my location – there were chains leading straight to it – and that was things got interesting.

Odds had always been low I'd actually kill one of them with the whirl. There'd been another reason for the move, and I showed as much when a pair of Longstrides emerged out of shadows and I picked two chained temples to send smashing down at them. Both dispersed, shadow-illusions broken by the impact, and it was from behind me they struck. One spear from the left, one from the right, and when I attempted to move forward out of their reach I found a large snake of Night striking out. Yeah, they'd definitely heard me complain. And they had a truly terrible sense of humour. I had only a heartbeat to react, my chained weapons too far to recall in time, so I dropped low. The spears and snake followed my descent flawlessly, but that moment of readjustment bought me just long enough to encase myself in ice. It shattered under the spear tips while the snake went straight though, but I'd left a hole at the bottom and turned into mist. I went back into human shape behind the snake, swinging a wall at it that caved in the shape and broke it apart. Night pulsed like a heartbeat on the other side of the mauled ice structure, and I backed away expecting an assault.

It wasn't, I grasped a moment too late. It was a *beacon.*

The full seven Longstrides were on me in moments, shadow-striding into the scene. The chains were getting too unwieldy for our combat range, so I drew them back into my domain. Just in time for the enemy cabal to prove they'd come by their reputation honestly. The two fighting me hadn't been going at it seriously, I realized. They were just pinning me down until the other hunters arrived – and when they did, the gloves came off. The sheer variety of Secrets caught me off-guard. One turned into a mass of shifting shadows not even remotely humanoid, tendrils and clawed limbs sprawling out. Another knelt and pressed a palm against the ground, Night spreading from it like a tide of rancid oil. One's own shadow slithered out to connect to mine as another touched its shoulder, and immediately I felt my blood turn into a muddy sludge. A ball of shadows formed over my head, casting impossible stripes of darkness down around me, and drow flickered out of those like they were passages. The entire thing had taken, at most, two heartbeats from the moment they'd gathered here. I'd fought heroic bands that were not nearly that skilled at working together. Shit, I wasn't sure the *Calamities* would be that good at it.

If this turned into a brawl I was dead. Winter or not, apotheosis or not.

"Let's try it, then," I said. "Your Night against mine."

Darkness fell over all of us, my kingdom manifest – for I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights, and here even Mighty were but troublesome guests. Cold beyond cold enveloped the Longstrides, coating their bodies with frost as their feet bit into supernaturally pristine snow. Not a speck of light here, though it mattered not to my eyes. Something deeper than vision was my due in here. Their Secrets broke like kindling, hollowed out by Winter, but the drow did not flinch. I'd seen my domain make sport of sorcery and devils, turn men into trifles, yet the seven Longstrides shook it off with seemingly little effort. Even bereft of their Night they moved, weapons in hand, and fell upon me. I could feel my power slithering through my veins, pure and untethered, and words were on the tip of my tongue. I swallowed them, familiar by now with the touch of alienation. It was growing in me faster than I could shunt it off. With flawless timing the seven struck together, but before their blades could bite into me I bit into *them*. There was warmth at the heart of them, flickering candles, and with a pluck of my fingers I smothered the flames. One after another they dropped, puppets without strings.

"Oh, but we are far from done," I murmured as the last fell. "I have a use for you."

If I was forced to use my domain this early, then I would at least get the full value out of it. Silver eyes turned blue, a brilliant droplet spreading and devouring the irises whole. My Longstrides rose to their feet. There was still Night in them, but it was cowed. Tamed by the looming power of Winter holding primacy inside them. How many Secrets would they retain, I wondered? It would be interesting to find out when I sent them out to war. There were still

one hundred and seventy three to add to my cohort of monsters, after all. The one wearing plate – *Segur*, my mind whispered – suddenly shivered. Surprise stilled my hand, just as I'd been about to shatter the domain and return to a marred Creation. It was no longer living, I'd killed it myself. So why did it feel cold?

"Glorious," the corpse laughed. "Deeply, unspeakably glorious. You stole half the Garden from their hands, Losara. It is *all there*."

Tendrils of silver spread through blue eyes, clawing back ownership.

"You have no power here, Sve Noc, save that which I grant you," I said. "And I grant you nothing."

Will against will, we struggled. I would have been crushed in an instant, were this Creation. But here she was trying to thread an ocean through the eye of a needle. I drove her back, inch by inch.

"But you did," the corpse said. "You let me in. You gave me an anchor. And so I stand, within and without."

Only the smallest sliver left. She was desperately trying to keep it in her grasp, but she did not belong here. I did not simply rule this place, it *was* me. My soul, or whatever was left of it, given shape. The dead drow turned to face me, the last pinprick of silver dying.

"Let it be one and the same," Sve Noc laughed. "*All is Night*."

I won and lost in the same moment. Chased her away just as she struck. My world of moonless night screamed, a cut appearing in the endless sky. It spread quick as lightning, splitting the starless firmament in half, and I screamed along my domain at the inhuman pain of it. A touch like fingers whispered through the opening, grasping the sides, and like curtains being opened the sky was pulled back.

I stood kneeling, forced back to Creation, as the whole of Winter was unleashed upon Great Strycht.

It was merciful thing when the darkness took me.

—

I woke up in a monstrous amount of pain, shivering.

My eyes opened to a moonless sky and a scream ripped itself free of my throat. It was wrong, wrongwrong*wrong*. It should not be there. There was no ceiling behind it, only an endless void that was no longer mine. My limbs were numb from the heinous throbbing that had claimed every speck of my body, feeling nothing but the pain. My fingers clawed at the ground and it gave. Were they bleeding? It was like they'd been scraped raw. I forced myself to sit, but my arms were shaking and I fell back. I swallowed the scream, but my throat bulged and I found myself spewing on the ground. I had to crawl away not to drown in it, nothing but clear water leaving my mouth. But the taste of it... Gods, nothing tasted like that. It was like life leaving my wretched body. I was surrounded, I finally saw, by ice and snow. As if some divine blizzard had ripped through the city, sparing nothing. I could not hear a single living soul. I couldn't... My body seized up and I twisted like a worm against the frost. I

could hear only my own breath. I couldn't hear faraway, not anymore. I could no longer sense the heat of living things, or see flawlessly in the dark. *She's taken all of it*.

I was just Catherine Foundling, and might as well have been blind.

I could feel my heart beat, my real heart. My blood flow from my veins. I had never in my life felt so vulnerable as I did then, stripped of every bit of power I'd clawed my way into owning. Made just a bag of blood and meat, one wracked with feverous shivers. The pain was going away, replaced by a cold numbness, and that was when I realized I was dying. Gods, I was tired. I tried to crawl again but my leg flared with agony even through the numbness. My limp, I thought, almost drunkenly. My bad leg. The wound I'd cheated my way out of so many times, but it seemed that dance could only be danced for so long. I fought to keep my eyes open, but the entire world was forcing them to close. I had lost. Some part of me rebelled at the thought. The same voice that'd kept me going through butcheries and catastrophes, through every dark hour I'd ever faced. It shouted, but the sound was dim. Muted. Dying, like the rest of me. The thought came guilty, but it would not go away. It would be a relief, wouldn't it? To sleep. To finally rest. I tried to think of Callow, but found nothing there to make me stand. I had brought so much destruction to my home, every day claiming I was saving it.

I'd given so much, without a single clean victory to show for it.

I wept into the snow, tears and dark laughter choking up my throat. Snot dripped down, to my visceral disgust. How long had it been, since I'd had *snot*? The thought startled me by its inhumanity. I'd died long before today, perhaps that was the harsh truth of it. My eyes closing here would just be a formality, a final curtain. I buried my face in the cold and waited. No footsteps came. No sharp memory drifted to the surface of my fevered mind. No vision filled my unseeing gaze, some mentor or foe chiding me or raising me up. Not a single damned thing. I was dying, and the world answered with resounding silence. But we all died alone, didn't we? That was the secret at the heart of Winter. I had worn grandiose plans in place of the regalia I disdained, and a single defeat was enough to shatter all of them. Was it like that with everyone? Or had I simply been building on sand all this time? There were no answers to be found, I knew. And the questions rang empty when I asked them. Would they mourn me? *Some*, I thought. *Few*, I admitted after. It would hurt the handful I'd found it in me to love, but that knowledge did not stir me as much as it should have. I was in pain as well, and for all that I had tried to be a better woman in the end my own pain mattered most to me. I'd stood for hours at the edge of the roof, as a child. Back at the orphanage. Because I'd been afraid of heights and hated it. Maybe there had been wisdom in that fear, I now thought. Maybe deep down I'd known there would always be that voice whispering taking the drop, oh so temptingly.

I waited and did not die. My face was warm again, I realized. I'd melted the snow enough I could breathe. I laughed. I couldn't help it. Even through

the painful convulsions I laughed, until a spasm had my cheek lying against a snow.

"Do I have to do *everything* myself?" I croaked out.

I fell into another fit of laughter at that. The sound of it was ugly to my ears, but then everything was. Gods, this entire world had gone from a master's work to a child's scribble. It almost felt beneath me to stay in it. But no, they wouldn't get to have that.

"That was your chance," I said, to no one at all.

I was already dead, wasn't I? Or close enough. A goddess had ripped open my soul and let the contents spill out. I was mortal as an insect, and there was no changing the ending striding towards me. I should have broken me, that knowledge. The inevitability of it. But it didn't. It was liberating. There were no *stakes* now. Nothing left to lose. Whether I rose or not would make no difference. So why bother, a voice insisted.

"Why not?" I whispered.

My arms gave again. Twice I fell back into the same patch of ice, stuck there watching it until the pain ebbed low and I could stomach moving again. But I managed to sit the third time, and that felt like something. My bad leg folded like parchment when I tried to stand and the fall that followed had me weeping like a child for the ache, so instead I crawled in the snow until I reached a broken wall and slowly hoisted myself up. To my hilarity, there were only about four feet of wall left to prop myself against until I'd have to stand on my own.

I had crawled to the wrong fucking wall.

I was choking on a mouthful of laughter – and bile, I *was* still dying – while considering where I should crawl next when a silhouette walked out of the dark. I couldn't make it out, at first, or hear it move. But eventually the face swam into focus and I found the pale silver eyes of Mighty Rumena watching me.

"Ah, finally," I drawled, regally flopping my wrist at it. "I was getting bored. And crippled, but that one's admittedly not your fault."

Choosing my words with great care, I grinned and met its gaze.

"Take me to your leader," I ordered.

Chapter 77

What Goes Around

"In trying to beat a fool at her own game, I have only made another."

Theodosius the Unconquered, after the Maddened Fields (apocryphal)

"Not to nitpick," I said. "But being carried this way is doing great injury to the inherent dignity of a woman of my station."

Mighty Rumena had, after sundry misadventures, hoisted me over its shoulder and was now lugging me around like a sack of cabbage. I got the distinct impression the old bastard was having a lot of fun with this.

"If I allow you to lean against me instead," Rumena said. "Will you cease attempting to strangle me?"

The drow was a tyrant, truly. It was my Gods-given right as a Callowan to rebel against foreign powers regardless of context or feasibility.

"Yes," I lied.

Mighty Rumena fluidly leapt over a canal, landing on the other side with barely a sound. It jostled my body enough I had to bite down on a scream.

"So," I got out. "We doing this or what?"

"No," the Mighty said. "I merely wanted to see if you would lie."

That prick. I'd gotten my hopes up, thinking of looking for something sharp to stab it with instead of having another fruitless go at strangulation – my fingers were too shaky to have the requisite strength, and to be honest I wasn't sure it actually needed to breathe.

"Fine," I said. "Obviously you're a man – drow, I mean – of deep cunning and perception. I'll level with you, Rumena. I was going to try to murder you again."

"I am aghast at this unexpected turn," Mighty Rumena said.

Oh, so Crepuscular *could* do sarcasm. This was a day for revelations.

"Since murder doesn't seem to be working out for me, I'll try bribery," I continued. "Betray... who is it you're working for at the moment?"

I probably should have inquired as much before beginning the process, I mentally conceded. Hindsight was a harsh mistress, as the effective evisceration of my soul and mantle had made clear.

"Arguably my kind," Rumena said. "Practically speaking, the youngest sister."

"That the murderous one, or the one that's basically suffered a few millennia of torture by Night?" I squinted.

"The former," the Mighty replied.

"That's fine then," I mused. "So, betray her drow ass and I'll give you half of Procer."

"I know of no such place," Rumena said.

"Right, it's pretty recent as far as nations go," I muttered. "Think the central chunk of western Calernia."

"And you currently rule these lands?" the drow asked.

"Sure," I said. "I mean, in a manner of speaking."

Lies were, technically, one of those.

"Fertile fields?" the Mighty asked. "Peaceful neighbours?"

Well, half of that was true. There was that unfortunate thing about the Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger bordering it, but nowhere was perfect.

"Absolutely," I answered without missing a beat.

"You are a surprisingly terrible liar," Mighty Rumena said, sounding impressed in the worst way. "How have you managed to survive this long?"

"Good officers, luck and the ability to walk off lost limbs," I replied, more honestly than I'd meant to.

Of course, in a sense I hadn't. Survived, that was. I'd died at First Liesse and then kind of again at the Doom. The whole Winter-eats-your-soul thing had felt in the general wheelhouse of dying, anyway.

"Luck always runs out," Rumena said.

"What a deep philosopher you are," I sighed. "Any more profound truths you'd like to share?"

"You warred against an entity older than the civilization that birthed you," the Mighty said. "Wielding weapons in which it holds superior mastery, following a plan laughably straightforward and fielding armies which owed you no true loyalty. All this, and somehow you believed you would win."

"Ouch," I said, not particularly offended.

I'd already lost, what was there left to be offended about?

"We going somewhere with this?" I asked after a heartbeat of silence.

"Nowhere, evidently," Mighty Rumena said.

The Secret of Scathing Retorts was unfathomably deadly, I mused. The half-blind pieces of meat that were now my eyes took in our surroundings as well as they could as the drow carried me through the ruins of Great Strycht – and there could be no word for it but ruins. Winter had blown through mercilessly, upending temples and halls like children's toys. We must have still

been in the central district when it found me, because our surroundings were vaguely familiar. They lay of the canals, at least, since the city looked like it'd been smashed to pieces by an irritated god. In a sense, it *had* been. It wasn't hard to find the dead, though it certainly was to tell which side they'd belonged to. Frozen silhouettes of drow, many seized halfway through a motion, were scattered all over the district. Some had tried to run, I saw. It hadn't done them any good.

"Is everyone in the city dead save the two of us?" I asked.

"You were not so powerful as that," Mighty Rumena said. "Many of those who fought under your banner remained, before they were made to kneel. And Sve Noc preserved her own when the heart of you was ripped out."

"Soul," I corrected mildly. "The soul of me, Rumena. Come on, it's not that complicated a concept."

I was mildly surprised having that ripped open hadn't killed me, but then maybe I shouldn't be. Akua had walked around without hers for years before our little heart-to-hand. She'd also been soulless in another way entirely long before that, but that was a different story.

"Not complicated," the Mighty slowly repeated. "Are you chiding me for considering the process of apotheosis a complex matter, Losara?"

"I mean, Praesi know about it," I said. "How complex can it really be?"

"I will cherish the memory of our little talks, after your throat is slit," Rumena said. "I believe you might be the single most aggressively ignorant creature I've ever encountered."

I spat out a ball of phlegm and bile, aiming for its leg and missing narrowly. So, interesting information there. I was being carried to a sacrificial altar, which I'd already kind of suspected but hadn't known for sure. Added to the bit about my former forces being 'made to keel', I now considered it a safe bet that Ol' Sve herself had come down for a bit of ceremonial knifework. Strange she hadn't killed them outright, though. Was it because she couldn't, or because she had a better use for them? It'd be a splendid little bit of irony if she ended up using the framework of oaths I'd built as the model for the army she'd be taking to the surface.

"I'm flattered, really, but I'm not in the market for a nemesis," I replied. "There's probably a line and it'd be unfair to all those angry heroes for you to just skip ahead."

"It is admirable that you refuse to compromise your principles even moments away from your unmaking," the Mighty said.

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic right now," I said. "And I think my hearing might be going, because there's this weird screaming sound that-"

I paused, then swallowed. Oh, so my hearing *wasn't* going. Nice to know. Slightly less nice was the patchwork of rippling Winter I was looking at. Ribbons of shimmering blue storming about uncontrolled, eating away at an obsidian tower like the King of Winter had suddenly said 'fuck this building in

particular'. My vision dimmed and I looked away blinking. It stayed dim, like a shadow had been cast over everything I saw.

"You could have told me I'd go blind looking at it," I screamed through the ruckus.

Rumena made me wait until we'd left the immediate area before answering.

"Did you?" the drow curiously asked. "Interesting. It should have driven you mad as well, then, and you sound no less coherent than usual."

"I think we hit the bottom of that barrel a few years back, buddy," I said.

That had been a knot of pure Winter, I thought, and it had been running wild. The power had never done that while I held the mantle. The – I avoided thinking of the word, knowing it would send me into another episode – nothing above our heads was the same as my domain's, so I'd assumed that Sve had devoured the whole thing. Or at least bound it somehow. But this was an interesting twist, wasn't it? Even if was in her belly, it looked like she was having some issued with digestion.

"So, how strong is your boss' stomach?" I casually asked.

"As strong as it takes," Mighty Rumena soberly replied.

"Gods, is that what I sound like when I talk that way?" I asked. "Someone could have told me it made me sound like an asshole. I'd have stopped."

"I assure you, there is no need to rely on specific sentences for that effect to be achieved," the drow smoothly replied.

"So much sass, Rumena," I grinned. "But was that uncertainty I detected? Someone's worried Sve bit off more than she can chew."

"A passing thing," the Mighty said. "In a sense, much like you."

Ah, and there it was. The reason it hadn't just nonchalantly torn off my head back when it'd first found me choking on my death in the middle of a broken wreck. I was still of use somehow. A sacrifice to cement Sve Noc's hold on my domain? I'd earned the mantle through murder, back in the old days of about two years ago. It might be that proper succession required the same deed by her hand.

"So, are we there yet?" I asked.

Rumena sighed, and I took perverse pride in the way I was managing to get under the skin of a creature a few millennia my senior. Unfortunately it then shook me on its shoulder, letting me slip back a little, and the fresh pull on my abdomen had me howling. The throbbing pain brought unwilling tears to my eyes, and to add insult to injury my throat began heaving. The droplet that tipped the cup was that even as I began spewing out clear water and bile the Mantle of Woe fell down over my face, smothering it all over my face. The Mighty left me like that for quite a while, until my stomach felt empty once more, and only drew me back up when left the district. The vomit-strewn cloak remained draped all over my face.

"That was genuinely cruel," I rasped out.

"Possibly why I enjoyed it so much," Mighty Rumena noted.

It was not far before our magic journey together came to an end, though of course I had no idea. The Mantle of Woe was still covering my face. I was carefully set down on solid ground, propped up against something that felt like stone. My legs didn't pain me at all, which I took as the opposite of a good sign. I was metaphysically bleeding out. Rumena's fingers closed around the hem of my cloak and pulled it back, finally revealing my surroundings to me. It was a hill of barren stone, one that must have once been an island. My Mighty friend was at my side, but we had other company: over a hundred drow were scattered around us, weapons in hand. The rest of the Longstrides? Without my otherworldly senses, I had no way to tell them apart from any other drow. Ahead of me lay a broke stele of obsidian, the symbols on it faded and the better part of it laid down as a makeshift altar. All of that paled, though, in comparison to the silhouette standing over it. A perfectly androgynous face larger than my entire body stared down at me, descending into a neck that melded with the robes of pure Night beneath it. Eyes of unbroken silver shone bright, but it was the hair that drew my attention. Long strands of darkness that went up into the nothing above like puppet strings.

"Sve Noc," I said. "Good of you to finally show up."

I cleared my throat, spat another bit of bile to the side.

"You may kneel," I allowed.

There was a heartbeat of silence, and then I was drowning. Thick, cloying terror buried me – the kind I had not known in ages, that screamed so loud it drowned out every thought. It was a primal thing, old as the nights where mankind had first huddled around fires for fear of what prowled outside. It was, I thought, almost religious. I began laughing in delight.

"That's the stuff," I grinned, body shivering uncontrollably. "*Gods*, you wouldn't believe how long it's been since I felt this much like a person."

Did she think this would break me? She had *ripped open my soul*. There was not a godsdamned thing left to break. The sea around be ebbed, and still the tinkling pleasure of real emotion stayed in my every extremity.

"Alone and lost," the Priestess of Night said. "As promised, Catherine Foundling."

"Please," I said, waving a shaking hand. "Call me 'Your Majesty'."

My half-blind eyes drifted around her… well body, was the closest word to it. And the revelations of the day continued, for there were threads in her robes that seemed more solid than others. Whatever she was doing, it wasn't finished. Considering the altar in front of me, the shape of the conclusion was rather obvious.

"Queen of Nothing," Sve Noc said. "And so no queen at all."

"Am I?" I mused. "Then why bring me here at all?"

"Tools wear no crowns," Sve Noc said.

"Clearly you've never met Cordelia," I said. "From the fact that my throat has yet to be slit, I take it we've a little while still before we get to the good stuff?"

"Your doom is writ," the creature said.

"Yes yes, very ominous," I snorted. "Rumena, be a dear and find my pipe will you? No point it making this uncivilized."

The Mighty had moved a few steps away from me while I traded barbs with its goddess, but not entirely left. It glanced at Sve and found no answer there – she seemed a little miffed by my refusal to take this seriously – so in the end it strode forward to rifle through my cloak pockets. I took the opportunity to clasp its ringlet tunic and wipe my face somewhat clear of vomit. You know, for appearances' sake. Rumena stuffed my pipe half-heartedly and offered it. I clasped it between my teeth and leaned forward.

"A light?" I asked.

The drow's fingers lit up with black flame and within moments the wakeleaf was burning. Black flame, really? Did every single application of Night have to colour appropriate? There was such a thing as taking an aesthetic too far. I breathed in the smoke with a shiver of pleasure, letting it stream out of my nostrils.

"*Oh*," I murmured around the shaft. "So that's what it used to taste like. I'd almost forgotten."

To my utter delight, the little moan I let out after made Rumena visibly uncomfortable. I leaned back against my stone.

"I don't suppose any of you folks have a decent bottle of wine?" I called out at the Longstrides. "It's been ages since I could properly enjoy one of those."

There was some confused shuffling, but no answer.

"And they call Callow a backwater," I sighed. "You all make for terrible hosts."

"No guest are you," Sve Noc said. "A bird of misfortune, headed to grim ending."

"Bold words, coming from a woman visibly fucking up her apotheosis," I replied. "How's Winter taste, Sve? A bit too much to swallow?"

It was a true shame Indrani wasn't there to make a ribald joke out of that, I thought.

"All will be Night," the Priestess thundered.

"You're just a pile of disappointments, aren't you?" I said. "At least Rumena knows its way around a phrase. You're just yelling threats and platitudes. It's pretty common with old monsters, you know? You haven't talked like a person for too long, so you don't know how anymore. Even Neshamah has touches of that."

"You think to threaten me with the King of Death?" Sve Noc laughed. "You know nothing."

I pulled at my pipe, eyes almost rolling into the back of my head at the pleasant sensation. I'd become so much less, but what I had left was so much more *alive*. Something as simple as the burn of smoke in my throat felt like the finest of wines.

"I know some things," I retorted mildly, spewing out the smoke. "Like, for example, that Winter is a hard stallion to break in. It's not really meant to *give*,

you get me? It's not flexible the way a Name is. Now, if I had to guess, you're too far gone into whatever the fuck you actually are to worry about something as paltry as alienation. So the issue would be that you're just as... static as the power you're trying to eat. You can't change to match it, like I did, so you can't align either. You have to bludgeon it into obedience, and that's proving a little trickier than you'd like."

"Crawling, wretched thing," Sve Noc said. "Still trying to escape your fate even now. Stripped of every ounce of stolen power, tumbling through death's door."

"Oh, Sve," I said gently, a grin tugging at my lips. "You poor thing. It's already too late. You see, this was all part of my plan."

In the absence of an actual scheme, it seemed like I was going to have to bluff a living goddess. Odds were I was going to bite it regardless, but if I was going to die I was at least going to shit talk the opposition on my way out.

"Your deception is feeble," the Priestess said. "Your plans are known to me."

"Convenient, isn't it?" I mused. "That you knew them all. That you crushed me so easily. Almost like I let you."

"Mad and desperate," Sve Noc said. "You resort to flimsy lies."

I inhaled the smoke, closing my eyes, and let it out. The acrid tang stung my nose, beautifully so.

"Why so many warriors, Sve?" I asked, opening my eyes. "Witnesses, honour guard? Nah, this is best left quiet. Not the kind of knowledge you want floating out there. I think it's a statement of power. A reminder of hopelessness, to break me down. But if that's the case, why *these* warriors?"

I croaked out a laugh.

"If you really wanted to stick it to me," I said, "you wouldn't have used people you already owned body and soul. You would have had my own army standing in submissive silence. But you don't."

I met eyes of blinding silver and smiled.

"I wonder why that is?"

"They have knelt," Sve Noc said.

"I think you broke them," I said. "I think you hurt them. But that you don't own them, not yet. Because this is still my soul, even splattered over the countryside, and you need a little something to take you over the top. Queen's blood, queen's death. A passing of the torch."

I cackled.

"How does it feel, to fall short even after millennia of scheming?" I asked. "It *stings*, I bet."

Gods forgive me, but I had missed this. Teetering at the brink of annihilation, knowing if I was struck down I would not rise again. Dancing with death bereft of anything but wits and lies, knowing the first mistake would also be the last. It was terrible and treacherous, the kind of recklessness that had left a trail of ruins in my wake, but Merciless Gods *I had missed this*. I'd grown dull, under the sway of my mantle, and now I felt sharp again. Maybe I was

drunk on the feeling of my own mortality, on the truth that there was nothing left to lose, but I felt like myself again. Finally, just as life left my body.

"And all you fine Mighty," I called out. "Will you just stand there like silent statues as your fates are thrown like dice? Do you not have a *stake* in this?"

"Be silent, Losara," Mighty Rumena hissed.

"Come on, be someone," I grinned. "Act. Sure, I would have made you servants. For the span of a cosmic breath and no more, but I'll own to that. I never thought much of it, since that thing in front of me has already made slaves of you."

"We are Mighty," one of the Longstrides replied. "Your words are empty."

"That might be true right now," I said. "But will you still be, when she's done eating Winter? Hells, I would have required service for a decade or two but *her*? She'll own you wholesale until the Last Dusk."

Rumena struck me across the face, and the only thing I could think was that it'd just made a mistake. If it'd let me keep talking unworried that would have been one thing, but trying to silence me? That gave my words weight. And theirs was a path of betrayal, wasn't it? They watched for the knife in everyone's hand. Even their own goddess. I couldn't make out what happened, but a moment later Rumena was thrown back and two silhouettes stood between it and me.

"Speak your piece, Losara," one of them ordered.

"**Enough**."

They screamed, the two drow, and fell as Night ripped its way out of their bodies like smoke. The same happened all around me, every Longstride messily collapsing. The tall shape of Sve Noc drifted forward, tendrils of darkness wrapping around my body and dragging me to the altar. She was looming over me in a way that was not physical, her... presence enveloping me whole. As if I was being devoured.

"**Trickery is no match for real power**," Sve Noc said.

"Then fear me, drow," Akua Sahelian announced, "for I wield the power of friendship."

I turned right in time for the shade, grinning gloriously with half her body emerging from my cloak, to bury her arm into my torso up to the elbow.

Chapter 78

Comes Around

> "The finest summation of Traitorous's reign I ever heard came from an illiterate peasant from the outskirts of Ater, who described it as follows: 'Like watching a snake eat its own tail, only the tail was fake the snake was an angry badger and also you are poisoned.'"
>
> Introduction to 'More Art Than Act' by Hakim of Kahtan, the Haunted Scholar

And so the sound of my fragile mortal shell being ripped into signaled it was time for everyone's favourite Wasteland game: backstab, help or both. Akua had grown on me, rather like the bubonic plague, so I was going to give her the benefit of the doubt and put my money on 'both'. It was mildly surprising she'd stuck around at all, to be honest. I'd expected her to be halfway back to Praes by now, considering I'd lost my leash on her along with my soul. The unsettling sensation of fingers squeezing around my beating heart was coloured by the unspoken acknowledgement this was a dark mirror to Second Liesse's ending. And to think they said Diabolist didn't have a sense of humour. The sheer shock of being torn into this brutally and suddenly was tipping me right over the edge and straight into the grave, my vision dimming, but in the darkness power awaited. Not owned, no. Sve Noc's victory had been too deep a cut for that. But Akua bestowed upon me a chord, an invisible string, and through it my fading senses expanded.

"Both it is," I muttered. "Called it."

Winter as an independent entity was dead. I knew that instantly and instinctively as my mind glimpsed the web of power spread over Great Strycht. There would be no restoration, it was too far gone for that. Sve Noc had clumsily melded Night and Winter where she could, though the merging was far from complete and my old mantle had reacted violently to the attempt. Knots of raging power had erupted all over the city, like too-large insects caught in a web of Night: wherever they stormed they weakened the weave around them. The Priestess had been hammering them into submission, I thought, one at a time. A time-consuming process, and a difficult one – like trying to smooth out

wrinkles on steel. I could feel the gargantuan weight of her presence gripping one of the storms, fingers pulling out the threads one after another and releasing them accalmed. *She had barely a sliver of her attention on me*, I thought. Broken thing that I was, I'd been judged harmless and only a cursory eye had been kept on me. Bad form, that. It would remiss of me not to make her pay harshly for it.

"You forced her to act early," Akua said.

Diabolist felt like she was at my side, but she couldn't be. I wasn't really anywhere, practically speaking. Just a ghost haunting the labyrinth, and her barely more than that. And yet if felt like her breath was whispering against my ear, like she was not even an inch away.

"So, the power of friendship," I said. "Feels a bit ungrateful to say as much after such a touching interruption, but we're not really friends. Acquaintances, at most, and that's being generous."

"You break my heart, dearest," Diabolist drawled. "Again."

"And I didn't even need to punch through your ribcage first this time," I replied, genuinely pleased. "I *am* getting better at this."

"So is she," Akua said.

She didn't point – we were presences, not flesh – but like a feather's touch her attention moved towards Sve Noc. My not-eyes followed.

"She wanted to bleed me after smoothing out all the knots," I said. "Like a coronation."

"Baptism in queen's blood, yes," Diabolist said. "Quite properly done, if a mite archaic. Queens are not as easy to acquire as they were in olden days."

"But she doesn't need it," I said, feeling out the web with a thought. "She's already winning, Akua. The Night is absorbing Winter, slowly but surely."

"This situation should feel familiar, my heart," she replied. "You are a claimant once more. The lesser one, certainly, but a claimant still."

"For what?" I asked.

"That rather depends, I think, on which of you successfully presses her claim," Akua said. "Before, I would have wagered it was sovereignty over night. But now... who knows?"

The shade laughed.

"Interesting times, dearest Catherine," she said. "Interesting times indeed."

"Interesting," I repeated. "That's a word for it. Especially considering I don't see your hat anywhere in the ring. This was your chance to get back on top, Diabolist. There will not be another no matter the outcome."

And if she hadn't stepped in the game would have come to an end. I could still vaguely feel my body in the hands of Sve's manifestation, but she'd yet to kill it. There'd be no point, I thought. What she needed on the altar was *me*, not a mangled empty corpse. If Akua had no chance of claiming this mess for herself I would have called this pragmatism, denying the Priestess her victory at the last moment, but she'd had other options. She could have fled, she could have fought. And yet here we were.

"Am I not in your service?" Akua said. "Bindings are formality, not essence."

"Don't waste our time," I said. "She's nearly done with the knot."

I felt the shade press close to me, almost like an embrace, and I saw Akua Sahelian whole. Not the shade with the bloody hole in her chest, not the semblance of fae I'd turned her into. The same woman I'd met under the Name of Heiress, who'd schemed her way into becoming the Diabolist and vaingloriously raised her banners against the entire villainy of the East. Golden eyes set in a sculpted face, her long tresses falling in a curtain behind her. Adorned in a crimson gown set close against long legs, belted high on her waist in rubies and gold. She'd always been gorgeous. Even when I'd first met her, before I'd learned to truly hate her, I'd thought as much. This was not Akua as she was, but as she still saw herself, and I could not call her anything but the culmination of centuries of Wasteland breeding: as beautiful as she was terrible.

"I have grown tired," she said, "of iron."

"There's no walking back the Folly," I told her. "Not even for this. I'm one life, Akua. That's the weight I have on the scales."

"I consider myself something of a theologian," she said. "And yet I still lack the answer to one question. Perhaps you can answer it for me. Which matters most, Catherine, when it comes to doing good – the conviction or the act?"

There was a beat of silence as the enormity of what she'd just said sunk in.

"You can't be serious," I said.

I was not sure whether to be amazed or appalled by what she was implying. Akua might be the single most amoral person I knew, which was saying something considering I was acquainted with the fucking King of Death. And she was talking of redemption? No, I realized. Not redemption. *The conviction or the act*, she'd said. I hated to even think it, but it fit with how she'd always done things. I used stories as an arsenal, taking up and discarding what was of use to me, but Akua? She rode them into the storm like a warhorse. It had killed her, in the end, the flying fortresses and the monologues. But before it had she'd matched an entire empire blow for blow.

"But I am," she smiled. "I shall be, Catherine, the most terrifyingly heroic woman in the history of my kind. And in the end, together we will learn the answer to my question."

"It's not the Gods you have to convince," I hissed. "It's me."

"Would you snuff me out for observing your own principles?" Akua asked. "I will do nothing but what you have demanded of me."

"They won't take you in," I said. "You have to know that. You can't *fake* being a good person."

"I have learned much from you, darling one," Akua Sahelian smiled. "I may fail, true. In my hour of judgement I may – most likely will – be unmade and cast into the deepest burning pits. But until then? Oh, what a glorious ride it will be."

She spun away from me, presence parting in full.

"Now, my dear Catherine," Diabolist said, and there was joyous laughter in her voice. "Shall we *save some innocents*?"

I would have argued still. Done something, anything, to deny this. But the last string of Winter was untangled, made docile, and even as the Night spread through it Sve Noc finally turned her whole attention to us.

"**Clever little rats**," the Priestess of Night said. "**You have earned death at my hand**."

It felt like the tide pulling back before the wave. Something unspeakably massive gathering before release, preparing to crush everything in its path. I called on all that I was, too, but I was no longer Sovereign of Moonless Nights. There were no bottomless depths of Winter to stand behind me, no stolen mantle to make me anything more than I was. In the face of a living deity, I stood a mere mortal – one with a claim, perhaps, but no less frail for it. If she crushed me here, I thought, would die. Unmade so thoroughly there might not be enough of me left for the afterlife. And so we began the dance one last time, for keeps. Winner got to be Queen Bitch of Night forevermore, a victory almost as terrible as defeat. I didn't want it, I realized. I didn't *want* to go back to the thing I'd turned into, that pale imitation of myself. A creature playacting at being a person, more a pack of lies and ambitions than anything remotely human. I'd feared alienation as the consequence of drawing on my mantle, all the while too far gone to realize I'd already estranged myself from everything that'd made me Catherine Foundling. Better to die than go back to it, I thought. To be nothing at all rather than be *that*. I closed my not-eyes.

"Mortal," I whispered. "To the end, whatever that may be."

A savage joy took hold of me, sweeter than wine, and I almost laughed. Even if it was doomed, even if all was lost – I would not go quietly into the night. I would go out kicking and screaming, making an unholy mess of it. Not-lips splitting into a grin, I took hold of what remained of my mind. *If you are the sea, then I am a needle*, I thought. *Slender and piercing and too slight to catch.* Hold and release, and then the impact of our wills shook the entire web. I went through like a needle through silk, and sunk into darkness. The pressure of it was crushing, a mind so much greater than my own bearing down, and I balked. *I am stone*, I thought. *The pebble beneath the coursing river, smooth and unmoving.* I crashed at the bottom, but there I remained. Unbroken. I could do this, I thought. I was so much less, but what I was could change. Adapt. She was too large to be able to do the same so easily. The sea withdrew and I let out a relieved breath. The web was frittering, I saw. Parts that had been calmed grew riotous as Sve Noc exerted herself against me. Winter was not so easily tamed.

"**Fumbling child**," the Priestess of Night said. "**You but delay the inevitable**."

"Hells, Sve," I grinned savagely. "That's my life in a sentence."

I had become unto stone, and so she became a chisel. She struck down, lumbering and unstoppable. She had become a chisel, and so I became wind:

shapeless, coursing around the might of her. The chisel broke into a storm, taking hold of me, and so I became a bird. I rode the winds, and she turned into a hand. Fingers closed around me, but I was smoke and slipped through them. It was a game of riddles, where the first mistake would be the last. Smoke was inhaled by gaping maw, the maw escaped by a scuttling rat, the rat crushed by boot only for mud to stick at the bottom of the sole. Shape to shape we went, ever changing and never twice the same. I knew, instinctively, that repetition would be barred to me. Always forward, or there could be only death. I had become a snake, coiling around a narrow spike, when Sve Noc screamed. There was a flicker, and I saw her long-haired silhouette again – with Diabolist stabbing away at her neck, dagger in hand. Taking your eyes off the Praesi, huh. Always a mistake, that. Akua was swatted away angrily, her shape shattered by the sheer force of the blow, but I was already moving.

"I am a sword," I murmured. "Sharp and merciless, I *cut*."

My will struck out against hers and finally I drew blood. And here was the pit fight Archer had promised, I thought. Two beasts in a hole, tearing at each other. Devouring. I was to eat what I had carved out, grow stronger from it. Ascend through this hallowed cannibalism and strike again, until one of us had consumed the other whole. That was Below's game, its promised and certain victory.

"Mortal, you meddling fucks," I snarled. "To the end."

I crawled into the gushing wound, spite warming me down to my petty core.

—

"It is forbidden, 'Mina. The vigil must be held alone."

The suddenness of the sound had me twitching. There had been the warm darkness of blood, until I crawled out dripping onto a floor of stone, and immediately the woman had spoken. I rose to my feet, eyes wary. It looked like a temple, that was my first thought. The ceiling was tall and curved, held up by arches and columns. The stone beneath me covered in strange scriptures similar to Crepuscular, but only in part. Older, I decided. What few words I understood among them seemed to be in the vein of astronomy, about celestial orbs and their movements. On all four sides arched thresholds led into nothing: I could glimpse a sea of lights below, and only then did I realized I was standing atop a tower. There were no stairs, no visible way into the room save the arches. Rich laughter drew my attention sharply, and my eyes moved to watch a pair of drow. Both young – *truly* young, not like the Mighty were – and long-haired, though their appearance was starkly sexless. One sat with her legs folded, in the centre of the room, while the other lounged against a pillar. She'd been the one to laugh.

"So many rules," the drow called 'Mina gently mocked. "Why apprentice to the Sages at all, if you intend on following all of them?"

Neither of their eyes were silver, I realized with a start. Both a deep amber, identical in every way. As if sisters. My blood thrummed with excitement. I'd been right, then. It was Sve Noc's soul I had cut open, and it was her memories

I'd crawled my way into. And if I got to the bottom, found the right path... My way out. The victory denied.

"We are the enemy of death," the sitting drow replied, almost chiding. "It is great honour to be chosen to stand among those who hold back twilight."

"Shrouded Gods, Andronike," her sister said, rolling her eyes. "You could at least wait until after the ceremony to start with that. If I wanted to get preached at I'd prostrate at temple like a good little zealot."

"There will be no ceremony at all, Komena, if you are caught up here," Andronike sharply replied. "I will be sent home in disgrace and Mother-"

"- will have to take the war oath or be forever disgraced," Komena interrupted. "I've heard that song before, sister. You say that like it'd be such a disaster. I'll be taking the very same oath this year, and it'd be nice to have kin at my side."

The other drow's face softened.

"You know I would follow you," she said. "If I had not been called to higher purpose."

"All hail the mighty Twilight Sages," Komena said, smile too serrated to be genuine. "May we forever kiss the hem of their robes."

"I didn't meant it like that, 'Mina," Andronike feebly said. "There is great honour in war service."

"Just not quite as much as in this," her sister said.

The other drow's eyes tightened.

"You have the talent, Komena," she said. "Our fathers both have sorcerer blood. Do not blame me simply because you never had the discipline to sharpen your skills."

"Much good they will do you, these precious skills," Komena said. "Cloistered in some hidden shrine, debating magic with crazed half-corpses. At least my *lack of discipline* will serve the Firstborn against our enemies."

"Fetching human servants for the rylleh?" Andronike ridiculed. "Squabbling with the nerezim over some empty tunnel? How well you would serve our people."

"How gladly you mock the same blades that keep our mines full, that keep the nerezim from making goblins of us," her sister snarled. "At least we *act*, inglorious as our lot is. Provide for the Empire Ever Dark."

"You talk like a colonist," Andronike said, wrinkling her nose. "The King Under the Mountain will slay us all, every Firstborn must take the oath! There will be peace, sister, as there has been for over a century. War is only ever waged for petty glories."

I coughed into my fist. Well, you couldn't get them all right. Probably the single worst thing she could have gotten wrong, but in her defence she didn't seem alone in her assumption. If the drow in charge had really all believed that it was no wonder the dwarves had wrecked them in the following wars. That did not sound like an empire ready for a hard fight. The two sisters continued to argue, but I let the noise wash over me. There was something... There it

was again. A tremor. I knelt, wincing as my lame leg flared, and pressed my ear against the stone. It came again, louder, and my fingers clenched. Not a tremor, a footstep. And one getting closer. Time to move on, then, I'd learned all I could from this anyway. There was no obvious way out, I thought, save the one I'd rather not take. I breathed out and got up.

"Oh Gods, this better work," I muttered, and took a running leap off the tower.

—

I thought I'd failed, at first, because I stood in utter darkness. But then there was movement, Komena sweeping out her arm and causing globes off glass to light all over the room. She'd gotten older, I saw. There was nasty scar on her neck, but it was the sharper features and braided hair that drew my attention. She wore armour, too: good steel mail, with pauldrons of sculpted obsidian. The sword at her hip was without a sheath and glinted cold blue. *Enchanted, for sure.* As she began unstrapping her armour I allowed my gaze to sweep our surroundings, reluctantly admitting that the woman who'd become Sve Noc had *taste*. And coin to burn, apparently, because much of the furniture in here was wood instead of stone and that was a rare thing in the Everdark. I froze when she did, only the noticing that there was someone seated in the corner. Who it was I could not tell for sure – though I had a decent guess – because they were masked and covered by a thick cloak. It was an ornate thing, the mask. Forged iron, the upper half of it a sun setting while the bottom was half the moon. Komena drew her sword without hesitation.

"I know not your intent, Sage, but I am a jawor of the Southern Army," she coldly said. "I will not be *disappeared* so easily."

The Twilight Sage slowly raised a hand and took off the mask, revealing the very pair of amber eyes I had expected. Andronike hesitated, worrying her lip.

"'Mina," she quietly said. "I know we did not part-"

The sword clattered against the ground, and I had to admit I was touched at the sight of Komena embracing her sister without the slightest hint of hesitation. The two drow remained like that for a long moment, and I saw their arms tightening against each other like they were afraid of letting go.

"'Nike," the younger sister said, after finally releasing the other. "Gods be kind. I have regretted many things since taking the oath, but none half as much as the last words we spoke."

"I'm sorry, Komena," Andronike whispered. "I was too proud to reach out, after. I have sown sorrow where there needed be none."

The other drow touched her shoulder, almost shyly.

"It does not matter," she said. "It could have been a hundred years instead of twenty, and still it would not matter. Heart of my heart."

"Heart of my heart," Andronike whispered back, voice shaky.

Komena shook herself, as if trying to wake. She smoothed out her already pristine armour out of nervousness.

"I am being a frightful host," she said. "I have senna, if you would like a drink – or! I have this bottle of this drink they call *wynneh*, from the Burning Lands. Very exotic, you wouldn't believe how many fingers I had to break to get it."

Andronike took her sister's hand and shook her head.

"Sit with me," she asked. "This is... better spoken sober."

Komena's eyes tightened.

"You worry me, sister," she said. "Are you in danger? I now striking a Sage is sacrilege, but I will not-"

"We are all in danger, I fear," Andronike croaked. "'Mina, what I want to tell you, it is a crime for me to speak it. Even if all you do is listen, they would-"

"Heart of my heart," Komena said, voice like steel. "Your woe is my woe. No soul can change this."

Her sister smiled, for just a moment, and it felt like dawn breaking over the room. Andronike tugged her down into a seat and they settled together while the Sage sister chose her words. *The ritual*, I thought. *This is about the ritual when they tried to become immortals.*

"They're going to kill us all, 'Mina," Andronike murmured, sounding genuinely terrified. "The Sages, the elders among them – they're afraid of dying. The alchemies work a little less every year and their minds have begun to fray. So they now plan a ritual."

"A ritual," Komena repeated slowly, trying to understand her sister's fear.

And failing, though I thought she was a decent hand at hiding it.

"They will borrow from the years of every Firstborn yet to be," the drow said. "They say they have it charted – they've used oracles, the old rites as well – but they're *wrong* Komena. There are too many uncertainties."

"There will be revolt, if this comes out," Komena said face gone grim. "I can reach out to other officers-"

"You don't understand," Andronike said. "They are *proud*. They through it we will all be made immortal. With the turn of the red season they will announce it themselves."

"But you don't believe it will work," the younger sister said.

"All it takes is a single mistake, and our entire people will pay for it," the other drow replied, shaking her head. "There is always a mistake, 'Mina. *Always*."

Her sister slowly nodded, and I watched her thoughts flicker through her face. Hesitation, first, then reproach. And after that only determination, cold and relentless.

"So what," Komena said, "are we going to do about it?"

Pivot, I thought. They were not Named, not yet, but that sentence and that moment were the beginning of a very dark road I already knew the end of.

"In that moment, I loved her more than I have ever loved anyone or anything."

I froze. She'd not made a sound, until the moment she spoke. Not a breath, not whisper of foot on stone. I turned and there she was, standing at my side. The cloak I recognized, for she wore it in front of me as well, but there was no mask now. She had grown, I thought, beyond such petty symbols.

"Strange," she said, head cocked to the side. "That even after all these years, I grieve that more than all the rest."

"Andronike," I said, meeting eyes of pure silver.

"Catherine Foundling," the other half of Sve Noc greeted me calmly. "I believe you were looking for me."

Chapter 79

As Above

> "Hubris and wearing a helmet are not mutually exclusive. Here, allow me to demonstrate."
>
> Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

"I'll be honest," I said. "I kind of expected to get to the bottom of memory lane before we ran into each other. You, uh, took me by surprise."

Andronike – Sve Noc's slightly less unreasonable half, or at least that was the hope – did not lean into the feeble attempt at defusing the tension. Fine, I thought, be that way. *We can be all grim about this, and not even mention that right now in a very real sense I'm inside your sister.* There was room for an even filthier joke in there, and really where was Indrani when you needed her?

"I expected you to move from shadow to shadow until you reached Tvarigu," the entity mildly replied. "Not to raise an army of slaves and declare war upon my entire race. This has been, one might say, a year for surprises."

I was really taking a verbal beating on the whole slave thing tonight, huh. Was this what if felt like to be the Akua of a situation?

"Subtle has never been my strength," I admitted. "It was a bad habit even before Winter filled my veins with pure 'walk off dismemberment' juice. Not sure I can shake it at this point."

Or even that I should, to be honest. I'd run into one dead end after another since I started trying to play queenly games with my opponents. It wasn't that I was awful at those – with the Woe at my back, I'd made sport of my opposition within Callow – so much that my enemies were just outright better at them. It was no excuse to cease learning, but on the other hand had it not been a kind of arrogance to believe that with so little schooling I could stand on equal footing with the likes of Hasenbach or Malicia when it came to their preferred methods? My own were brutish and clumsy things, but in the end I'd accomplished more with bastard ways than proper ones.

"It seems like tonight it is your flaw that will be doing the shaking, then," Andronike indifferently commented.

"Night's not over yet," I said.

"Fascinating," Sve Noc said, though she didn't sound fascinated in the slightest. "Even knowing that my sister pursues you, you would still waste your time on idle banter. You are quite peculiar."

My fingers clenched.

"You're not stopping her," I realized. "Or stopping mind-time, whatever the Hells this is. She's still coming."

"And will annihilate you the moment she finds you," Andronike agreed. "It is inevitable. Even if you flee, eventually there will be nowhere left to run."

"Could you not, uh," I eloquently said, gesturing vaguely.

Silver eyes flicked at me, unamused.

"Why should I?" she replied.

The memory was still unfolding in front of us, the two sisters speaking conspiracy in hushed whispers, but that wasn't the fire I needed to be paying attention to at the moment.

"I want to make a deal," I said.

"So I assumed," Andronike said. "That is usually the way, when one is staring defeat in the eye. What I wonder is why you'd presume I would be willing to indulge you."

"This isn't going to go like you think it is," I said. "If she eats Winter-"

"The sum of your knowledge on this matter is animal instinct and second hand crumbs of understanding from the heir to over a millennium of abject failure," Sve Noc cut in. "While your fumbling attempts to sow discord in ignorance might amuse another, I am not fond of such crude forms of humour."

I grit my teeth.

"First off, Hierophant is a fucking treasure," I said. "Sure he's not perfect, but he's kind and smart as a whip and he tries his best. Don't shit talk my friends, it's rude."

Andronike simply stared at me, then shrugged.

"The hourglass is emptying," she reminded me.

"I'll be expecting an apology later," I said, equally unmoved. "As for the other thing, it's no secret I'm not the most learned in things sorcery. But you know what I *do* have a knack for? Stories. And we're treading one right now, Andronike. You want to guess how it ends for the two of you?"

"This is puerile," Sve Noc noted. "You are the one who sought me out for conversation."

"It's been a long my whole life," I grunted. "Humour me."

She did not reply. I sighed and was I about to prod the conversation forward when I felt the reason she'd not spoken up: a tremor shivering across the ground. The other half was catching up.

"We'll finish this later," I told her. "I need to strategically manoeuver out of here."

There was no open stretch to leap down this time, which complicate things a bit, but the room was splayed before me in full. Including, luckily, the door.

I hobbled forward, trying to spare my bad leg, and tugged it open before going into the dark.

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"Come on," I muttered, limping forward. "Give me what I need."

There was no winning this with power, I knew. The moment I was caught I'd be swatted into oblivion, Andronike watching with mild interest as my soul was obliterated by her incensed sister. Even our thrilling little chase earlier had seen me on the defensive almost the entire time, only Akua's intervention giving me an opening to strike. Even if I returned to the pit fight, even if I somehow managed to defy the odds and devour her before she devoured me, it would be an empty victory. I'd go right back to being an imitation of myself, only with a second kind of poison running through my veins. I needed to mold the situation so that at least half of Sve Noc *wanted* me to win, and so far on that front I was swinging at mist. I didn't have good enough a grasp of what moved the sisters, and it wasn't like idle chatter was going to get me here. Somehow I doubted the legendary power of stilted small talk would allow me to turn this around. Fortunately, I could skip the middle man and have a direct look at their – hers, maybe, for I was not sure if these were shared or purely Komena's – memories. I'd been hoping for another pivot, hard decisions taken behind closed doors, but what I got instead was a battle.

The end of one anyway.

Komena was easy enough to pick out from the rest of the soldiers, as her pauldrons were a different set of sculpted obsidian but the rest of her armour had not changed. She was standing among a small band of drow officers, the lot of them idling behind another drow at the edge of a steep promontory overlooking a city. One I did not recognize, it bore saying. The signatures of drow architecture were there, the bridges and complicated segmentations in height, but it wasn't anywhere I'd been before. This looked like a victory, I thought, yet the mood among the officers was grim. Unlike any other drow city I'd seen this one had walls – four interlocking sets of them, with tall bastions towering over – and beneath those there was a thick carpet of corpses. Many of them drow, but there was no small amount of dwarves to match them. Given that the city still stood and the likely invading dwarven army was nowhere in sight, the Empire Ever Dark was master of the field. Yet below in the winding city streets I could see soldiers retreating in haste, forcing aside panicking civilians to make their way out faster.

"Jakrin, Soliva," the drow closest to the edge said. "Have your javelineers scatter the crowds of the outer district. The delay is dangerous."

My eyebrows rose in surprise. I knew that voice. Not so long ago it'd been mocking me mercilessly. Under the helm and ornate armour it was difficult to have a look at the drow, but the voice did not lie: I was looking at a younger Mighty Rumena. Was that what it'd meant, when it had said it knew one of the sisters? Komena had actually served under it during the wars? Rumena's orders drew no enthusiasm, but two officers peeled off to see to their ugly duty.

"The rest of you, see to your sigils," Rumena said. "Prepare for the retreat north. Dismissed."

The drow scattered without a word, all save for Komena. She strode forward instead, coming to stand at Rumena's side, and I limped forward to flank it on the other side. The three of us looked down at the city eating itself alive, silent for a moment.

"Great General Who Shook The-" Komena began.

"Enough, rylleh," Rumena tiredly replied. "Today I held command over the single greatest military disaster in the history of the Firstborn. Spare me the titles, they now have the ring of mockery."

"It is not of your making, this war," the woman who would become Sve Noc said. "I was there when you protested the deep raids. As were all the others."

"It might not have been such a disaster, had we kept to the humans," Rumena mused. "But they were too few, too far. We needed nerezim slaves if the hallowing was to happen in our lifetime."

I let out a sharp breath. It'd been the drow that started the wars with the Kingdom Under? Deep raids, Komena had said, and all the greatest of Praesi horrors had been forged of human sacrifice. *Gods, they were fool enough to attack the dwarves for ritual fodder*, I realized.

"We had no idea, did we?" Komena murmured. "What they could bring to bear in their fullness of their wroth."

Rumena stiffened, though not because of her words. It leaned forward, staring intently at the city, and I followed its gaze. It was gazing at some open-roofed temple. The structure was no great wonder, but its floor was glowing red and orange. No, not glowing. Melting. A massive creature with stone-like skin, horned and clawed, ripped free of the floor. Lava poured out in its wake, erupting like a fountain.

"I am told," Rumena said, sounding darkly amused, "they use the creatures to heat their forges. They are not even soldiers, Komena. They are exterminating our kind with *smithing tools*."

Red and orange bloomed over the city, smoke and screams filling the air, and I felt nauseated. Merciless Gods, was this the true face of dwarven warfare? No wonder the drow were still terrified of them after so many centuries. Still, interesting as this was it wasn't getting me anywhere. Even as the two began discussing how much of their army they'd lose in the evacuation, I stepped forward over the edge of the cliff and embraced the fall.

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"Now this is more like it," I said.

The room was a barely-contained riot of scribbles. Every surface was covered with long equations in numerals I did not recognize and incantations in that near-Crepuscular I'd glimpsed in the first memory. There were piles of some strange string-like parchment scattered over what sparse stone furniture could be found, and Komena was going through one patiently.

"There," she said, handing it to her sister. "The full transcription."

Andronike took it absent-mindedly, a brush wet with red paint twirling between her fingers. On the wall in front of her scattered equations had red lines through them, others hasty corrections. The older sister finally glanced at the parchment she'd been given and frowned at what she found.

"It is as you said," Andronike sighed. "It cannot be sacrifices. It would only worsen the gap."

"It has to be the molten earth currents," Komena said. "When we campaigned against the forest humans, they used the very land against us without relying on their own sorcery. The underlying principles should be the same. If the nerezim can master-"

"We are not the nerezim, 'Mina," her sister replied, sounding irritated. "In theory you are correct but it would take decades if not centuries of deep study before we could even begin to imitate their mastery."

"We can't wait forever, 'Nike," the other drow reminded her. "If you're right, the tipping point was reached last year. The moment inertia ceases carrying us..."

"I know," Andronike sighed. "*I know*."

The second instance had been whispered and on the wings of it all semblance of vitality left the Sage. She looked afraid, tired, and so terribly young. I could sympathize.

"They're still settling our former colonies," Komena said quietly. "But it won't be long before they start advancing again. They're refused the latest peace offerings."

"We have greater worries than that," Andronike murmured.

Her sister's eyes narrowed.

"You said we should still have five years, before we start dying," she said.

"And that has not changed," the older sister replied. "But the Sages are terrified, 'Mina. They know the consequences of so many lost lives, and they have found no remedy in our lore."

"Then there is none to be found anywhere," Komena said. "Who else is there?"

Her sister looked away.

"'Nike," Komena repeated slowly. "*Who else is there*?"

"They have," the other drow said quietly, "sought the advice of the King in Keter."

"Shrouded Gods," Komena snarled. "Have they gone mad? That thing destroyed an entire human realm."

"And survived," Andronike said. "Conclusion was reached that our kind as a whole can no longer be preserved. Yet the eldest of the Sages believe that is no reason for them in particular to perish."

"How many times can a single band of fools damn an entire race?" her sister cursed. "They have to die, heart of my heart. I know you hesitate but we can no longer mass support in the dark. We must strike before they do."

"If we kill them before we have our remedy, we have slain the Firstborn through them," Andronike said.

"Gods take them all," Komena said, passing a hand through her long hair. "As if they hadn't done enough damage already."

Her sister paused. After a long moment, she put the parchment back onto the stone table and refreshed her brush with red paint from a pot. Striding forward under Komena's bemused gaze, she slashed through another few equations and then from that drew lines leading towards a rare empty spot on the wall. On it she wrote a single word in ancient Crepuscular, and this one I knew well: Night.

"We had never considered it before then," Andronike said. "Neither of us were all that pious, and the Shrouded Gods have even been a capricious lot."

I didn't freeze this time. I'd expected her to show up from the moment I'd realized this particular memory would actually be of use to me. She seemed fond, I noted, of standing at my side. As if we were companions, the two of us watching some play unfold together.

"You needed a miracle," I said. "And the hour had grown too late to quibble as to the source of it."

Sve Noc blinked in surprise.

"An apt summation," she conceded. "We did not grasp the full consequences of the bargain, then. We still believed it was a cure we would wrangle."

"But what you got was a stay of execution," I said. "The Night keeps them alive only so long as you keep feeding it fresh sacrifices."

"As a young girl the notion would have disgusted me," Andronike said. "But we'd both lived through the wars by then. Still, it amuses me in retrospective that it was her who balked at the terms when they were given. She cared for our kind in a way I never truly understood."

"Why tell me this?" I frowned.

She'd not exactly been forthcoming with details so far.

"You do not understand the scale on which we operate, Catherine Foundling," Sve Noc chided me. "How intentions fade in the face of eternity. The unmaking is in the details, you see. Allow me an example. I was of the Sages, and so unlike other drow allowed to learn of their history. They were once a great boon to my kind."

"The same crowd who doomed you once and then tried to have another go at it," I skeptically replied.

"They were necromancers, at their inception," Andronike faintly smiled. "Not for conquest, but for peace and learning. They called on the wisdom of our ancestors, allowing the spirits to speak through them. Death, in their eyes, was the only sin – for it robbed the living of the wisdom of those departed."

I'd seen the later meaning of those words with my own eyes and it had little to do with that gentle sentiment. *Justifications only matter to the just*, I mockingly thought. Sometimes you looked back and wondered what kind of madness had moved your lips.

"You wonder why I burden you with such tedious history, no doubt," Sve Noc said. "I lead to a question – you held great power for years, Catherine. What did you build with it?"

Silver eyes studied me.

"What shape will your creations take, after your passing?" she said.

My lips thinned. Legacy. She was speaking of legacy. And what would mine be? Some things transient, other less so. I had changed the face of rule in Callow, left the old nobility to lie in the grave Black had dug for it, but there was no guarantee it would remain there in the decades to come. Tradition had a stubborn pull on my people. The Army of Callow had learned the Wasteland ways of war, but that was Juniper's work more than mine and without a War College of our own to keep the torch lit the reforms would die with our generation. I'd fought wars, and liked to think most had been worthy of being fought. But that was to preserve, was it not? It was standing still, not advancing. I'd tried to bind more than humans to the Kingdom of Callow, more than born Callowans as well, but the numbers were few. A single goblin tribe, a few legions' worth of foreign soldiers and officers. Not enough, I suspected, to truly change the threads the Callowan tapestry was woven from. Unpleasant as the thought was, perhaps the most consequential change I had brought to my home was receiving the oaths of the Wild Hunt. *And that will die with me.* Andronike, I thought, had been inviting me to ponder how what I'd created would twist and turn with time.

Instead I'd found I had created little and less.

But there was one thing, I thought, that I would count as legacy if I could – though it was so very far from done. One dream I was trying to bring into the world.

"I imagine the Accords will grow warped, in time," I said. "And yet I have faith that even in their worst incarnation they will be better than the current face of Calernia."

"Faith," half of Sve Noc said, "is ever a costly affair."

"Is that how you live with this?" I asked. "You tell yourself you were had, you were beaten, and that's all there is to it?"

"You should choose your words more carefully," Andronike coldly said.

Ah, was that emotion peeking through? Finally we were getting somewhere.

"You seem under the impression I'm afraid of you," I said. "Best discard that, it'll make this easier on both of us."

"Do you believe your little shade will save you?" Sve Noc said. "It has hidden well, but not flawlessly. Whatever her scheme it will end, and there will be no salvation through her bloody hands. Not half as clever as she thought herself to be, in the end."

"Now, there's a lot of harsh stuff to say about Akua Sahelian," I said. "Believe me, I've covered a lot of that ground and I'm still discovering fresh pas-

tures. But I'll say one thing for her: even at her very worst, at least she wasn't a spineless sack of whining like you."

This, I reflected, was not my finest attempt at diplomacy. Well, too late to take it back so I might as well roll with it.

"Are you truly so arrogant as to believe I cannot destroy you here?" Andronike said.

"That's beyond my control," I shrugged. "You're pretty much a goddess at this point, you could snuff me out like a candle at any point and there's nothing I can do about it. But hey, not even an hour ago I lied down to die in the snow. As far as I'm concerned every moment from now on is an unexpected turnout, so if I'm about to be sent Below I might as well speak my mind first. You're getting on my nerves, y'see, because behind all the bluster you're a coward."

"Your opinion is less than dust," Sve Noc frigidly replied.

"So you got screwed by your deal with the Gods Below," I said. "Surprise, who could possibly have seen that coming except literally anyone who ever read a history book not written by the violently mad. Still, I'm in no position to cast stones for bad bargains, given my record, so there you get a pass. Where you *don't* is that over a thousand years have passed and the Everdark is still a murderous clusterfuck. If anything it's gotten worse with the years."

"It is as it must be to maintain the Night," Andronike said. "Every grim beat of it."

"And you're proud of that?" I said. "Of maintaining this? It's one thing to make a desperate mistake, but you've kept it going ever since."

"Until today," Sve Noc harshly replied. "Until you delivered yourself into our hands."

"Can you not learn?" I hissed. "The Gods Below helped you into this mess in the first place and *you're still doing what they want*."

She rocked back in surprise.

"How do you think this goes for you, Andronike?" I pressed. "They throw two bears into pit, you come out with your teeth red and it's all over? You do this, you give them the victory they want, and they own you all twice over. There's no slipping a noose you tightened yourself."

"The debt-" she began.

"- isn't even the point," I interrupted heatedly. "You think *Winter* is going to make things better? Its fae were almost as bad as devils, Andronike. *Devils*. Let that sink in for a moment. They'll still have their hand up your ass, only this time it's permanent instead of a ritual and you will never, ever be rid of it."

"And being made into your *pets* is better?" she snarled. "An army of slaves to die for your cause, then sent away in some remote corner to rot when the usefulness has passed."

"You're right," I said.

For the second time tonight, I took her by surprise.

"You're absolutely right," I admitted. "If I still bore my mantle I might be ranting about how it's the lesser evil and at least with a leash on you'd be doing

some good, but that's honestly disgusting. So is what you made of your people, but it doesn't excuse what I planned to do in the slightest. I was wrong, and it might mean dust to you but I apologize. I treated you like rabid animals in need of shackles instead of a people brutalized by circumstance and I can only be ashamed of it."

"You are mad," Andronike said.

There was an undertone of awe to the statement.

"I am *angry*," I correcting, baring a grin that was all teeth and defiance. "Truth is, Andronike, I've been angry all my life. At the Praesi for owning my people, at my people for being owned. At my father, for being so much less than he could be. At my friends, for even needing someone like me. At myself for the trail of smoking ruins I've left in my wake. At my enemies, for just *refusing to listen*. I've been angry for so long that without the anger there'd be nothing left of me. It's who I am."

I bitterly laughed.

"And most of all, I'm angry I never left the fucking Pit," I told her. "Because you and I, we're not saviours or monsters or anything half as grand – we're the *entertainment*, Sve Noc. We take out our pain on each other and their tally moves with the groaning weight of the dead."

"There is nothing else," Andronike said.

"There is," I quietly replied. "We don't claw at each other like animals. We help each other out of the pit instead."

Eyes met, silver to brown.

"They can't play shatranj if the pieces don't listen," I told her. "So I could say I want to make a deal, but that's the wrong way isn't it? This isn't a competition, it's not about winning. There doesn't *need* to be a loser."

I offered her a hand.

"You have my help, if you want it," I said. "And there are hardly words for how very badly I need yours."

Slowly, her arm rose. Then she struck like snake and seized me by the throat.

Damnit Akua, I thought, *you broke the power of friendship.*

Chapter 80

So Below

> "I speak today not for humble man-eating tapirs but instead for the most ambitious specimens their kind has ever known. Is it not the sacred duty of all Creation to seek to claim the Tower? How, then, could it have been a crime for these tapirs to follow this same dictate by devouring our late Emperor?"
>
> From official transcript from the Trial of Unexpected Teeth, opening speech of the defence

"What a silver tongue you have," Andronike said. "But not quite silver enough. Your ignorance shows once more, Catherine Foundling."

I tried to respond 'when does it not?', but I was currently being choked so it came out as more of a plaintive gurgle. So, this was how it ended: literally choking on my own words. Had to give her points for the irony, if nothing else.

"Allow me to educate you," Sve Noc said, and threw me like a bloody rag doll.

Well, I thought, *there's a bright side to this. I'm currently not dead. Or at least not more than I was when this delightful interlude began.* The slightly less bright side was that I was flying through flickering scenes, memories I could only glimpse the barest pieces of, and soon enough I would… *Ah, there it is*, I mused, managing to keep a semblance of mental calm as my leg snapped and my throat busied itself screaming. That utter asshole, I bet she'd aimed just so my bad leg would be the one getting the worst of the landing. I tumbled listlessly against the floor, my magical journey ending in the close acquaintance of my forehead and a stone wall. Still not dead, admittedly. I wouldn't be in such an excruciating amount of pain if I was. My forehead was going to bruise, if I still had a body by the end of it. I moaned and flopped around until I was looking upwards, feeling out my knee and finding it only mostly broken. Could I still move on that? Maybe. There'd be a lot of howling involved, but it shouldn't be impossible. I still stayed down for a while, lying uncomfortably on the floor.

In the distance people were dying.

"Educate me about that, would you?" I sighed. "Like I haven't strolled through a dozen butcher's yards."

Might as well find out what had her tossing me around, I eventually decided. At this point I'd taken my swing and missed, I might as well die slightly less ignorant than usual. My good leg supported me as I forced myself up using the wall, taking a proper look around at my surroundings. Yet another drow city I'd never seen before, though I had a decent guess as to where we were: I was standing among a city-sized temple carved out of massive stalactites. The streets here were not interrupted by 'canals' that were effectively sheer drops, and hobbling to the edge of one told me there was an *actual* city below. If this wasn't Holy Tvarigu, I'd eat my fingers... again? No, first time. I'd made other people – insofar as fae were people, anyway, – do it, but that hardly counted. I flinched at the vivid memory of it. Gods, I'd made people *eat their hands*. It'd seemed reasonable at the time, and damn me but I could still see the sense in it, but I couldn't remember even hesitating for a moment. Not that hesitation would have made it better, I silently conceded. Cordelia Hasenbach's passing comment had cut deeper than she knew.

What did regret matter, if it changed nothing?

The temple-city was strewn with corpses as far as I could see. Whatever battle had taken place here had ended, or at least near to it, and now this place was little more than a freshly-bloodied mausoleum. By Andronike's passing mercy or a stroke of luck, I'd landed near the heart of the temple. I could only be thankful for that, I thought, as I eyed the mind-bogglingly complex web of stairways and bridges connecting everything. Some ways in front of me a wide staircase progressively narrowed in rising to meet a passage lightly sloped. On both sides it was flanked by a very short wall of painted stone topped by striking sculptures. It was a chain, I thought, as I began the painful climb. At the head of the stairs two androgynous drow of marble painted red and yellow roared out with curved blades in hand. From their back sprouted more drow in different colours, wielding whips and daggers, and facing those drow in hooded robes offered a supplicant's kneel. The whirlwind of colours and faces and poses continued all the way to the end of the passage, where the heart of the temple-city awaited.

It took me far too long and far too many bouts of yelling to make it up the stairway, but the view when I did was almost worth it. Wouldn't keep me alive, but that was probably asking too much. The riot of vivid pigments should have turned it ugly, but there was something almost hypnotic about the sight before me. More ziggurat than pyramid, though that failed to truly catch the essence of it: it was almost a stairway of giant steps, but a triangular mouth going all the way to the summit struck out from the rest of the structure – which was roofed, at that narrowest point, by some sort of cylindrical tiled pavilion. At the four cardinal directions pale or red stone made up the life and death of celestial orbs: sun on the rise and fall, moon ascendant and passing. It was like looking at a hundred rainbows made into stone and woven into a single

tapestry. There was hardly a trace of such wonder left in what I'd seen of the Everdark. The thought shook me out of the trance and I resumed my advance. Halfway through the passage I finally noticed I'd not been alone for some time: hidden among the statues were drow, armed and armoured. They'd been so utterly still I'd never noticed. I continued limping until I entered the heart-temple, and there I found what Andronike had meant for me to find.

Inside were burned made of what must have been all precious materials in existence, from ivory to a massive hollowed out emerald, and every single one of them was wafting thick trails of scented smoke. At the centre of the shivering columns the two sisters were kneeling in front of simple carved piece of obsidian. A star map, by the looks of it. Andronike finished unfurling a large scroll filled with equations and incantations I'd already seen before, then passed her fingers over to smooth it out.

"Ready?" Komena asked.

"How could anyone be?" her sister replied. "Yet here we are."

She breathed in loudly.

"We request audience," Andronike said.

"We request bargain," her sister said.

I hobbled forward with an expectant gaze, strangely eager to see the moment where they'd sold out their race with the best of intentions, but nothing happened at all. Stillness held the room.

"Damn me," Andronike said with quiet horror. "I have killed us all."

Her sister opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by an unholy ruckus. A dozen burners had been tipped over, by the sounds of it, and for a moment I thought it'd been me. But no – I turned, and there was someone in the middle of a set of spilled burners who'd quite evidently tripped on them. A drow, I saw. It rose hastily, pretending nothing had happened, and retched a little before slapping away the thick smoke.

"Gods," the drow retched again. "That stuff is *foul*."

Both sisters went still.

"O Shrouded God," Komena said hesitantly, but the newcomer's hand rose.

"Give me a moment, girls," it rasped out.

It patted at its dirty robes and produced a flash of polished copper. My heart skipped a beat. The Wandering Bard uncorked her flask and took a deep drink, before gargling it and spitting out the liquor. The sisters traded an appalled look. A little less godly than they'd been aiming for, I supposed. The Bard took another swallow of liquor, wiped her mouth and went looking through the tipped burner before triumphantly snatching out a broken lute. Apparently she'd mistakenly spat some liquor on it, because with a shoddy attempt at discretion she began wiping at the wood with her sleeve.

"Good enough," the Bard announced. "Right, so onto business."

"You are no deity," Komena flatly said.

"Well spotted," Bard cheerfully replied. "And to think they told me you were the stupid one. For the purposes of this conversation, you might consider me an envoy of sorts."

"You claim to speak for the Gods," Andronike frowned.

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that," she said. "I've never been quite that much of a fool. But you called and here I am."

"Are you a devil?" Komena pressed.

"Would it matter if I were?" the Bard shrugged. "Regardless, I hear the two of you are looking for a loan."

The sisters stirred, Andronike picking up the scroll she'd unfurled.

"A miracle is what we would bargain for," she said. "The specifics-"

"Are known to me," Bard replied, waving the words away and accidentally sloshing some booze onto the floor.

One of the burners caught fire, and everyone delicately pretended it was not actually happening.

"Even the parts you got ambitious with," she continued, lifting a finger off her flask to wag it chidingly. "Making it reusable? Now now, that's trying to inflate the value. Just because you shove old skills and power into new heads doesn't mean the following deaths are worth as much as the first."

"We sought only to offer the finest possible tribute," Komena baldly lied.

"I can't believe I'm rooting for you right now," I muttered.

Still, if the opposition was the Wandering Bard then 'All is Night' was most definitely the banner of the moment.

"More need than brains, huh," Bard drawled. "No wonder you're in good odour with the old crowd. Still, you two are a little late. They've been a lot more careful about where they put their money since Nessie ate the hand that fed him."

"We offered all we have," Andronike gravely said.

"Yeah, but you don't have *enough*," the old thing said. "I'll level with you two, since you seem slightly less awful than your average drow. This? This whole thing? It's not anybody's plan. No one thought you'd actually fuck up so badly you'd obliterate yourselves. The folks upstairs are watching like hawks, and the other side's wondering if it's worth it to intervene given the... costs of such direct action."

"We offer fair bargain," Komena insisted.

"Fair is for children," the Bard said. "They're not interested in it."

"Yet here you are," Andronike said, amber eyes narrowing.

"Killing the Sages and calling Below in the middle of their seat of power was a nice touch," she replied. "Got you the audience and a consideration. But the terms are going to need to change a bit."

"This is an exceedingly delicate arrangement," Komena said. "We can't simply-"

"You will," the Wandering Bard gently said. "Or you'll die, every last one of you."

"Speak your terms," Andronike replied.

It sounded like a surrender, because it was.

"'Nike-" her younger sister began.

"We are in no position to negotiate," the older drow tiredly said.

"Debt isn't wiped," the Bard spoke softly into the silence that followed. "The Night will keep you all alive, but you two will need to keep *it* going. And if you stop. . . "

The ancient entity grimaced.

"Well, they're not above cutting their losses," Bard said. "Let's leave it at that."

"Should we even bother to accept?" Komena harshly replied. "Or is even that *formality* unnecessary?"

"I wish you wouldn't," the Wandering Bard murmured. "There are some things worse than death, and what this will make of you is one."

She drank once more, then offered a sharp grin.

"But we all know better, don't we?" she said.

I'd known how it would end from the start. I'd seen what had become of the Everdark and the two sisters, after all. And still, watching the light dim in the eyes of the two true drow in the room, I felt my stomach drop. Was there a single horror in this continent's history the Wandering Bard did not have a hand in? The thing was, I understood why they'd made this choice. It was uncomfortable to even think it, but if offered the same terms with my own people on the line I would very likely make the same choice. Passing a hand through my hair, I gingerly lowered myself down to the floor while leaning against a pillar. So which part of this had it been that Andronike wanted me to see? Even odds it was either the Bard's very presence or that threatening little bit at the end. *They're not above cutting their losses*, the Intercessor had said. Was a gentle way to speak of genocide. Was that what Andronike was afraid of? That the moment she and I made common cause, a snap of the fingers Below would destroy her entire race? *But it shouldn't work out like that*, I thought with a frown. The Gods were, well, exactly that. All-powerful. They could probably end the Night and likely Winter itself. But there was a story unfolding, and if they did anything of the sort they'd be directly meddling.

They couldn't do that without opening the door for Above to do the same, and the Heavens should be taking a brutal beating right about now. The Dead King was on the march, the last thing Below would want was Above getting a free swing at him.

"So it's the Bard you wanted me to see," I said, raising my voice.

"The Bard," Sve Noc repeated, walking out from behind the pillar. "What a quaint name. We knew her as the Envoy."

"Neshamah called her the Intercessor," I said. "And I suppose if anyone's got her number it's him."

"The King in Keter wears a crown of lies," the silver-eyed drow replied. "No creature born of this land has ever been half as skilled at the art."

She moved to lean against the pillar I was sitting back against, standing above in both the physical and metaphysical sense. Well, at least *one* of those was new.

"He's her enemy," I said. "Trusting him would be foolish, but he wants her to bleed. That much can be believed in."

"Trust is always foolish," Sve Noc smiled. "It is faith writ small, and almost as dangerous."

"So did you throw me here for a game of riddles?" I drily replied. "Because I can roll with it. The more you make, the more you leave behind. What-"

"Footsteps," the goddess said.

"I might not win this," I reluctantly conceded. "I only know, like, five riddles and that one was the best."

If we made this about bawdy jokes instead my years at the Rat's Nest would finally pay off, though. Worth a try.

"A riddle of my own, then," Sve Noc said. "Why share what can be taken in full?"

I frowned, twisting to look up at her.

"You're not Andronike," I said.

"I never said I was," Komena calmly replied.

"I've been over this with your sister," I said. "But what the Hells, maybe the second time's the charm. Just give me a moment to think of an insult to get you angry before this gets going."

"Your *offer* has been made known to me," Sve Noc contemptuously said. "There is no need to reiterate. I was partial to the notion of immediately crushing you underfoot, but request has been made that you be allowed to speak your piece first."

Well, wasn't that promising. I gazed ahead, honestly at a loss as to where to begin, and only now noticed the memory had stopped. Frozen. Maybe it really was only Komena's memories, I thought. She certainly seemed to have greater control of our surroundings than her sister had. My eyes lingered on the Wandering Bard, the flask halfway to her mouth as she opened her mouth.

"She can be beaten, you know," I said.

"You have not," Sve Noc said. "And yet would demand that we throw in our lot with you."

"I haven't, it's true, but there's a villain down south called the Tyrant," I said. "I have it from two rather reliable sources that he screwed with her plans in a major way last year. It *can* be done."

"I lacked fear, once," Komena said. "As you so foolishly do. I have since been taught better."

"I just heard a woman try to lie to what she knew to be envoy from the Gods," I said. "*Brazenly* so. She had a chance at getting her people out of this mess, I think."

I smiled thinly.

"Now though?" I said. "You won't even try. My opinion might be dross in your eyes, but I wonder what she'd think of you now."

"Petty sentimentality," she mused. "Is that truly the sum of what she brings, Andronike? *This* is what shook you?"

The other sister walked out from behind another pillar, this one in front of me. For terrifyingly ancient creatures, they did enjoy their petty theatrics.

"When have we last been called to account for our many sins, sister?" Andronike said. "There is worth in such a thing, even coming from her."

"That last part was unnecessary," I noted. "I mean, not wrong, but definitely unnecessary."

"If you felt the need for a pet there are better choices," Komena said, eyeing me darkly. "This one has been beaten too harshly to still be amusing."

"I'm not even going to grace that with a response," I indignantly said.

"A goddess has no interlocutors," her sister said. "Only supplicants."

"Judgement only has meaning coming from one worthy of casting it," Komena said. "This one hardly qualifies."

"I'm not going to claim I'm a saint," I said. "And I've definitely crossed some lines, but-"

"Is this where you claim influence by your mantle once more?" the younger sister asked. "You could, at least, attempt a believable lie. 'Nike, she's not even held her half of the Garden for a decade. The drift would be negligible. It was still *her*. The only difference was that she had power enough to cow her foes."

My fingers clenched. I didn't want to believe that, and I wasn't sure I did. But this was the Pilgrim all over again, wasn't it? If there was anyone learned on the subject of mantles in Calernia, it would be the two of them. On the other hand, she'd already confessed she intended to kill me. Believable lies from enemies were a deadly thing.

"Humans are notoriously weak-minded," Andronike replied. "Arguably the ease of their swaying is their defining characteristic as a species."

I grit my teeth. Insulting as this was, I wasn't exactly in a position to contradict her. I only had the one crossbow to wield and it was currently pointed straight at my foot.

"This didn't *have* to get racist," I still protested.

"Then let us see," Komena said, ignoring my perfectly valid complaint, "the stuff Catherine Foundling is made of. Grant me the power, sister. I will not destroy her yet."

Andronike considered me for a long moment, then inclined her head. My mind was racing at the implications. Angry Sve couldn't kill me without Calm Sve's say-so, then. Andronike owned the floodgate even in here.

"Done," she said.

Komena pushed herself up and came to stand over me. Well, it wasn't like I was capable of stopping her. Might as well do what I did best: mouth off to entities beyond my comprehension.

"Please be gentle," I shyly said. "It's my first-"

"No," Sve Noc cut in.

What followed lived up to the word. Before the Battle of the Camps, I remembered, I had gone looking through a Deoraithe soldier's mind for bits of useful information. If it had felt anything like this I owed the man apology and restitution. The sensation of cold fingers prying through my memories had me regretting the jest I'd just made. It was an intrusion, on some fundamental level, and there was no hiding anything from Sve Noc's piercing gaze.

"There," she said. "We begin with blood."

For what he said and what he'd done, I'd decided he deserved to die – my hand had done the rest without any need for prompting. Edge parallel to the ground, slicing across the major arteries just like the butcher did it to pigs in the marketplace.

I gasped out weakly. She'd brought that to the fore, but her grasp had not slackened. I could still smell the blood in the air, the taste of the first life I'd ever taken. I could almost feel Black looking on, face unreadable.

"Humans killing humans," Andronike commented. "Nothing of import."

"A child arrogating powers beyond her due," Komena contradicted her. "The birth of a recurring pattern. And see how quickly it comes again-"

I let what I'd just done sink in, closing my eyes. With a life spared, I'd just killed thousands. I'd just promised cities to fire and ruin, sown the seeds of a rebellion that would rip the land of my birth – the very same land I wanted to save – apart. But I'd also bought the war I needed. Damn me, but I'd bought the war I needed.

The Lone Swordsman, granted his life so that I may rise through the deaths it would bring. My throat clogged with old disgust. I'd never gotten over that quite as well as I liked to pretend. I'd just had darker things to my name, usurping the place of that early sin when it came to the litany of my regrets.

"Her own kind, thrown into the flames," Komena said. "There are no similarities, Andronike, only lies she made herself swallow."

"Not done without purpose," I croaked. "Not for the sport of it. Because I thought it had to be done."

"You were wrong," the silver-eyed drow said.

"I was," I got out. "And I will be again. But it still matters. If I stand judgement then judge me for all of it. Not just the parts that suit you."

"Not desperation, sister," Komena said, turning to address our audience. "It was ambition that held the knife. Best not forget that."

"Not always," Andronike said.

I couldn't beat the monsters by being better than them. I'd never had that in me. Too much impatience, too much recklessness. That was all right, though. There was another way: be the bigger monster.

Akua on the Blessed Isle, a false victory. The two of us under moonlight, the beginnings of a dance that would see us both spinning for years. The moment I'd first admitted to myself I could live with being a monster if I still won.

"Pride," Komena objected, shaking her head. "Refusal to lose even at the cost of principle. Must I bring out every example of this?"

The duel against the Duke of Violent Squalls, the Arcadian Campaign, Second Liesse. More recent, after that. The Battle of the Camps, Keter. The moment I bestowed a title on Ivah and bound it by oaths.

"Always another sliver shaven off," Komena said. "Another compromise. How long would it take before *we* became the sacrifice?"

Andronike did not answer. She was, I thought, being convinced.

"This is most irregular."

Both halves of Sve Noc jolted in surprise, and the younger sister's grasp slackened for a moment before tightening twice as hard. I craned my neck to look at the source of the sound and winced.

"Finally you crawl out of your hole, shade," Komena smiled. "I will enjoy this a great deal."

Akua Sahelian stood among us, her scarlet dress flowing down to her feet, and managed to convey utter disdain without ever significantly moving her face.

"There are proper forms to observe, you grasping savages," Diabolist scoffed. "This is not at all how a rigged trial is held. I see an accuser yet no defence – you can, and indeed should, bribe the defender, but you cannot dispense with the office entirely. It is simply not done."

"Sister," Komena began, but the other raised her hand.

"She is less dangerous here than out there, stirring trouble," Andronike said.

"I find the shallowness of your understanding deeply offensive," the shade retorted, wrinkling her nose. "*This* is the finest your misbegotten race has to offer? Even the least of Tyrants would have made matching cutlery sets of you."

"I know you think this is helping," I began, then paused. "Wait, do you? *Are* you trying to help?"

"You test my patience, shade," Andronike warned.

"You test mine, chattel," Akua replied. "Even a devil is owed an advocate."

Komena laughed mockingly.

"And you would be hers?" she said.

"Why," Diabolist smiled, extending her arms, "I only want to see justice done. Shall we begin?"

There should be a rule, I decided, about last moment rescues not being allowed to make a situation worse.

Chapter 81

Only To The Just

> "Thus the Gods granted us the second boon: beyond the veil of death lies a land of always plenty, which will only be open to the just."
>
> The Book of All Things, fifth verse of the second hymn

Why was a trial taking place at all?

I kept my face expressionless even as the question consumed me. I knew why Akua would want one: given long enough, she could probably convince a circle it was actually a square. I also knew why Komena wanted one, or rather didn't. She simply didn't have the power to do anything about it at the moment. What was tripping me up, though, was why Andronike had boarded this ship. She'd already implied Diabolist might be troublesome if allowed to continue whatever folly she'd been up to out there, but that couldn't possibly be enough of a reason to indulge this farce. I gave it better than even odds that Akua had come in here with an exit strategy, a way to flee if this turned sour on her, but why not simply hang me on a crook and temporarily devote their energies to taking care of the Diabolist issue before resuming? There was, I decided, a deeper game afoot. True to form, I was the only player involved unaware of the stakes and the rules. Could I feel out the shape of it by figuring out what the older sister was after? No, I decided after a short beat. Even now she was too hard to figure out. On the other hand, I knew Akua like few others. Her I might be able to use for the purpose. *So, Diabolist*, I thought. *What are you actually up to?*

"You claimed the role of defender," Andronike said, silver eyes unblinking. "Proceed, shade."

"As a titled noble of the Dread Empire of Praes, Catherine Foundling is owed trial before a jury of her peers," Akua mused. "Yet I suppose you will have to do."

The insult I immediately discarded as unimportant. She'd never been quite as above trash talk as she liked to pretend, a tendency that exposure to the Woe had only worsened. She was establishing my stature as a Praesi noblewoman

– which technically was true, since Malicia had years ago titled me Lady of Marchford even though greater titles had since eclipsed that grant – but also recognizing that the older half of Sve Noc had right of judgement over me. One or both parts of that were useful to her purposes, I decided.

"There is no empire here save ours," Komena denied bluntly. "Your laws and dues are of no worth."

Thrust and parry, I frowned. Had it simply been an attempt to make Praesi laws apply to whatever the Hells this was turning into? She'd certainly be more familiar with them than anyone else here, and that opened the door to a multitude of exploitable technicalities. But it should have been fairly predictable that wouldn't work, we had nowhere near enough leverage in this to make that hold. My eyes flicked to Andronike's calm face. Arguably no leverage at all, I thought. And yet here we were. She was getting something out of this, something separate from the offer I'd extended. What? The answer to that question was the key to surviving this.

"Then you stand here in your role as shared rulers of the Everdark," Diabolist said. "With all attendant duties and privileges."

I knew that faintly indifferent tone of voice all too well. It was the same she'd used every time she was making sport of me before an audience of fellow Wasteland vultures. She'd laid a trap and Komena had fallen for it. Establishing stakes? If the sisters were here as rulers of their kind, the outcome of this might apply to all drow. Which meant that the outcome of this bad play mattered somehow, there'd be no point in pushing for this if it didn't. I bit my lip. Why would it? We had no way of enforcing anything, the power disparity was to the point of the absurd. It would take something-

"Oh fuck me," I murmured.

-something even stronger to do that. Like a story. Akua was trying to screw them the exact same way I'd screwed *her* at First Liesse. Except this time I was theoretically on her side and essentially blind as to the specifics of what she was trying to accomplish. The moment I opened my mouth to say anything I might very well be striking a match in a munitions warehouse.

"That is so," Andronike replied without hesitation. "I stand in judgement over an invader."

Think, Catherine. What does 'Nike get out of this? Why does she play along? This ended either in my acquittal, which I suspected was what Akua might be going for, or in my conviction. Somehow I doubted Diabolist and Andronike were after the same outcome, which meant 'Ol Silver was aiming for the noose. What would she get from it that choking me out earlier wouldn't have accomplished?

"Good," Diabolist smiled. "Now, I believe that assertion was made pride has been her sole master all these years. I would bring evidence to the contrary. Catherine, if I may?"

"Try not to make a mess," I sighed.

"But that's not why I'm making this decision. There are eight thousand innocents in Marchford, Juniper. I refuse to abandon them."

Her grip was lighter, I'd give her that much. Maybe as a consequence the memory didn't feel nearly as vivid, and it took me a moment to place it. War council of the Fifteenth, after the demon had slipped the leash in the hills south of Marchford. When my officers had been arguing for retreat west and abandonment of the city. I had not forgot, though, exactly who it was that'd loosed the demon in question. Hard to, when she was the same woman currently speaking in my defence.

"The Battle of Marchford," Akua said. "A choice between pragmatic retreat and principled stand. This too, Sve Noc, is a pattern that must be recognized: holding to loyalties in the face of danger, even when inconvenient."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Yeah, she was definitely going for acquittal here. Which I supposed might mean being worthy of allying with? At least half of Sve Noc seemed aware there was a story in the works here, and so she might step carefully if Diabolist pulled this off, but even then I didn't see the 'wrong' verdict holding up afterwards. *Which might be what Akua is actually after*, I frowned. Putting at our back a story of the sisters breaking their word, even if it was only implicitly given. It'd been a mistake in thinking to assume that the shade would be after the same thing I was, namely making allies with the pair. Akua Sahelian was a creature who only ever sought absolute endings, be they victories or defeats. And that meant, unfortunately, that putting all my coin on the madwoman trying to fool living gods wasn't an option. I couldn't just lie there like a dead fish and await salvation. Even if she managed to win, it would be the wrong damned sort of victory. Shit. That meant I'd have to handle her, Andronike and Komena at the same time. Each of them after something different and in at least one case what exactly remaining unclear to me. This was going to get trickier than I was equipped to handle.

"Laughable," Komena said. "Is there a single teacher or benefactor she has not turned on?"

I gasped as she riffled through my memories none too gently. The images flickered in quick succession: putting a knife in Black, after the dust had settled on Second Liesse. Coronation in Laure, as good as open rebellion against Malicia. Standing before the Queen of Summer and the King of Winter, unmaking them both by giving them exactly what they wanted.

"All of which betrayed her first, in one manner or another," Diabolist shrugged. "Can you show me a single instance where she was first to wield the knife?"

"And so she is indecisive as well as untrustworthy," Komena mocked. "You dig ever deeper."

"Now now," Akua chided. "Personal attacks are the mark of failed argument. If you've no counterpoint to offer, such flailing only serves to shed further light on your incompetence."

"A single instance taking place prior to the acquisition of her mantle," Andronike said. "Your argument stands, shade, yet not as tall as you would wish.

I require more recent decisions. You were yourself instrumental in the enslavement of many of my kind. The matter must be addressed."

I drummed my fingers against my leg. There it was, the hint as to what she was after. Like I'd thought it, was conviction she wanted. So she was on her sister's side. Whatever hesitation I'd sown was gone, they were back to riding the same horse. *No*, I suddenly thought. *They aren't.* Komena might be serving as the attack hound, at the moment, but that wasn't what she actually wanted. If given the power she'd strike us both down in an instant. Andronike's road still ended in my death, presumably, but she wanted to carry out the full farce first. Make it about my being judged and then annihilated. The semblance of justice had some use to her. The whole thing still had the smell of sacrifice to it, but there was a difference between simple victory by strength and the hanging of a villain. The latter had a narrative behind it, and I could only see one use for that: she wanted to ride it against Winter. That was the only reason she'd humoured Diabolist, she wanted Fate to back her claim on my former mantle. And so finally I knew what everyone was after: Akua wanted to trick the sisters to their death, Komena wanted heads for her spikes and Andronike wanted me to walk to the altar willingly.

And I needed to outmanoeuver the three of them simultaneously, while prone and having my mind ransacked.

"Oaths were taken, this is true," Diabolist said. "Yet willingly, in fair bargain."

"Death or kneeling is no bargain," Komena said. "It is conquest by another name. Most damningly of all, it is *failed* conquest. There is no victory to redeem the outrage."

"Can one be made a slave twice over?" Akua denied. "Were the Firstborn not already owned?"

"Then the offence of theft is to be added to insult," the younger sister replied.

"You concede, then, that the drow were and remain slaves," Diabolist pressed.

Komena hesitated, smelling the trap. I could have taken the moment to try to unfold Akua's latest trick, but there was no point to that. I wouldn't get through this by following her lead. Two outcomes to a trial, conviction or acquittal. That it was rigged from the start mattered little, I thought, it was only playacting to strengthen a story. Could I break this, then? Refuse to recognize the authority of my judge? No, that'd only give Komena what she wanted. Heads, spikes, the usual. It irked me that the proceedings themselves were largely meaningless: it was all just squabbling for the right position in the eyes of the story. Diabolist and Andronike were fighting over the knife they both wanted to wield, the 'being in the right', but I suspected the moment it was clear Sve Noc would not get what she was after she'd discard the pretence and turn to violence. *You're still trying to win according to the rules,* I remembered, *when you should be trying to win despite them.* Gods, it would be so much easier to be rid of him if his lessons were not so useful. Even now, years later and

hundreds of miles away from anything he'd ever seen. As in so many things, Black had the right of it.

Nowhere this 'trial' would lead to suited me, and so there was no need for me to play along with it.

I closed my eyes and the talk washed over me. Komena walked back her first claim, terming her people as servants instead, and Akua argued that servants finding other employment was no crime. They went around in a circle, Sve Noc claiming the service was to Below and so meddling in the matter was blasphemy, Akua arguing that as a villain I was equally in Below's service and so no blasphemy was had. The shade was better at this: they'd put up their soldier against my schemer. And while we were fresh off our wars with Above, they'd been stewing in a hole of their own making for millennia. We had the edge, by the slightest of margins. That edge just wasn't being used for what I wanted. I croaked out a laugh, opening my eyes.

"Do you hear the sound, Andronike?" I said.

There was a pause in the argument.

"Catherine-" Akua began, but I shook my head.

I met her gaze. *Trust me*, I silently asked. *I have taken us from one mess to another, and twice you've had to save my life tonight. Trust me anyway.* Slowly the shade nodded. She had been my nemesis, once. There had been understanding in that as well as hatred.

"I hear a trial," Andronike replied.

"Not me," I mused. "It's just this awful patter I can make out. Click click click. Claws and feet. Four crabs in a bucket."

She eyed me in confusion.

"Ah, not familiar with those I take it," I said. "They're these-"

"I know what a crab is, Catherine Foundling," Sve Noc flatly replied.

"They trap those, in the city I was born," I said. "In cages, then they take them out and put them in buckets. Went swimming a few times when I was a kid, and once I came across this crabber. He'd taken them out of his cage and put them in one of those very buckets. I was surprised when I saw it was just a regular old one – no trick to it, not even a lid. So I went up to the man and asked why they didn't just escape. You know what he said?"

The drow did not reply.

"A single crab would escape," I smiled. "But when you have more than one? The moment it's about to get out, the others will *drag it back down*."

"This again," Komena sneered. "Is there-"

"Now, all that's left of this one is hunger and hubris," I casually interrupted, jamming a thumb towards the younger drow. "I forgive her for it. And Akua, well, she was raised in a bucket even more vicious than this one. She's still learning to let go of those blinders. You, though? I'm disappointed that at no point you figured out you could simply *ask*."

"Would you like to confess?" Andronike calmly said.

"Click click click," I replied. "You're still acting like the only way you can win is if I lose. We both know that's not true."

"Apotheosis," she said, "cannot be partitioned."

"So that's the pebble in your boot," I snorted. "Gods, you think I *want* to be Queen Bitch of Night? There's not a lot things I'm afraid of, but going back to the mantle is one. It was like having a sieve between me and Creation with only the ugly stuff going through."

"It's a trap, sister," Komena said. "The shade will have its jaws unhinged, lurking behind us."

"Akua Sahelian," I said. "I order you to discard whatever you have wrought."

"We can still triumph," Diabolist quietly said, facing me in full.

"And that's the kind of victory we all prefer, isn't it?" I pensively said. "Complete. Mistress of the field, every opponent ground to dust."

I flicked a glanced at where I'd ripped out her hear, then at the halves of Sve Noc.

"Look where it's gotten us, thinking of compromise as *weakness*," I said. "A shade and half a corpse. The two cannibal goddesses of an endless butcher's yard."

"We are nothing like you," Komena hissed.

"Look at us, you fucking fool," I hissed back. "*Actually look at us*. Is there a single one of us that isn't a monumental failure? I carved open like a pig the only thing I've ever tried to save, again and again. Akua watched every single belief she held to burn to the ground around her before I *ripped out her beating heart*. And you two, Komena, Merciless Gods – even a monstrous thing like Wandering Bard *pitied* you for this."

"And who are you to lecture us?" Andronike said. "Who are you, that your advice should be heeded? By your own lips an admitted derelict."

"I'm not better than you," I said. "That's not what this is about. We could all debate body counts and ruins until the Last Dusk but what would that accomplish? One of us being the worst of the lot doesn't change what's on all our shoulders. Nothing does."

"Desperate," Komena scathingly said. "Running scared. This is no offer, it is terror gilded with false sentiment."

"This is absurd," I laughed. "We're holding a trial over what, my *worthiness*? I am a funeral procession of mistakes and horrors. We all are. Plunder my memories all you like for justifications or blemishes, it doesn't make this any less of a sham. Sure, I'm a monster. What do you care?"

"And you would have us clasp hands in alliance with a monster," Andronike said. "A strange argument you make."

"Like you give a shit about humans dying," I snorted. "Or even about my character, such as it is. I'm not asking you on a moonlit walk for a spot of kissing, Sve Noc, I'm offering you a power stolen through murder to help you cheat the death of your entire race. Again. Why are we still pretending my regrets or principles have any weight on these scales?"

"We would have no guarantees on their end," Akua said, voice blanked of emotion. "No means to ensure they hold up their part."

"It's always the need for control that fucks us, isn't it?" I mused. "It killed the very partnership that dug Praes out of the pit. You and me too, Diabolist. How much could we have avoided if instead of clawing at each other we'd sat down and *talked*? How many tragedies would have never come to pass if we'd just bent our proud necks the slightest bit?"

I looked at the sisters.

"You think I'm a fool," I said. "Fine. My record holds to it. But ask yourselves this: a century from now, while you watch the essence of Winter turn your people into animals despite your best efforts, will you not regret this even a little? That one moment where you could have done it differently?"

"Different is not better," Komena said.

"It could be worse," I agreed. "I won't deny that. Devouring Winter is an agony assured, but this could turn out worse. It's still a chance, though."

I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

"It's an unknown," I said. "It's terrifying and dark and it could be the single worst thing any of us has ever done – but it's not impossible to get out of a bucket. You need to own that, deep down. That if we're the crabs we're that because of *fear* and not because there was no other way."

The silence that followed hung heavy over all of us. There was a song in it, I thought. Four monsters assembled in a room that wasn't. Night twofold, harsh and serene. The Doom of Liesse and the Black Queen who slew her. The silver-eyed sisters were mirroring statues of stillness, not a hint as to their thoughts revealed. Andronike eventually let out a breath.

"It burns, doesn't it?" she told her sister. "*Sincerity*. I'd forgotten the taste of it."

"Once more we come to the crossroads, heart of my heart," Komena murmured. "I believed in you then. I believe in you now. But this?"

She shook her head.

"Beautiful words, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Yet still only words. It was no kindness to any of us, letting you speak."

My hands shook. Gambled and lost. All of it. Akua stirred but I leant back against the pillar. Fighting was pointless. I'd asked for a leap of faith from the faithless and received the inevitable from that arrogant roll of the dice.

"Asked," I repeated in a murmur.

Hypocrite to end, was I? Demanding what I would not offer. Was compromise on my own terms even compromise at all, or just victory by another name? For all I'd said tonight, one thing had not changed: I had not learned to *lose*. I dragged myself up, biting my lip not to scream at the flare of pain.

"Hear me, Sve Noc," I said. "Whatever claim I yet hold to Winter, I pass to you. My crown of Moonless Night, I lay at your feet. I stand before you without power or right to my name, mortal at your mercy."

Two pairs of silver eyes widened. I could feel the crushing weight of them swelling, breaking the memory apart at the seams.

"Help me," I asked, begged, prayed. "*Please*."

Night fell over me and I breathed my last desperate breath, clawing at the dark.

Chapter 82

Thrice Dead

> "Now, luck it always turns. Nothing you can do about that. But that's the trick, you see – wait long enough, and it turns all the way around."
>
> Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The matron would be asleep by now, she'd hit the brandy pretty hard at dinner: this was as good an opportunity I'd get. I closed the book and snuffed out the stolen candle, ignoring Lydia's theatrical sigh of vindication. I wasn't sure whether she really had so delicate a constitution she couldn't handle a bit of light when she was trying to sleep or whether it was just our shared dislike coming to the fore, but I could hardly care less. She'd leaned not to rat me out after I smeared her sheets with fish guts, if all I had to deal with was a little attitude I'd cope. I passed an affectionate hand over the worn cover of Serapin's 'The Licerian Wars' and shoved it under my pillow, brushing away the few wax droppings on my sheets from the candle before stowing it away under my bed. One of my predecessors at the Laure House for Tragically Orphaned Girls had pried open room between the straw mattress and the wooden frame that was just large enough for it to fit. I slipped on my shoes and snuck out of the room, careful to close the door slowly enough the hinge wouldn't squeak.

The orphanage was dark – every lantern and candle snuffed out the moment the matron went to sleep, to cut on costs – but I knew my way well. It wasn't the first time I snuck out after curfew, though technically speaking I wouldn't even been leaving the House for long. The front door was locked, but only the youngest girls in here didn't know you could force the lock if you pushed at the right angle. I slipped into the street quiet as a mouse, closing the door behind me. I'd taken me a while to figure out how to get up to the roof, though it'd been made much easier after some stall merchant began putting up her folded stall next to the wall. She paid the matron coppers for it, which was a good deal as far as everyone was concerned. I suspected she might be less sanguine about the whole thing if she knew I regularly used her stall as a

makeshift ladder. The tricky part was the leap to the left, where I had to catch the jutting masonry or hit the pavement after a hard fall. I turned out lucky tonight, catching it on first try even if my sweaty palms threatened to have me slip loose.

I hoisted myself over the edge of the roof with desperate haste, moist fingers scrabbling over the rough tiles as I rolled like a sack of cabbage until I was no longer at risk of falling. I remained there a moment, heart beating all too quickly, until I wiped my palms on my trousers and rose into a crouch. No point in standing tall – well, relatively speaking – until it was time. I headed towards the back of the orphanage, since that street wasn't as busy. Not that Laure was after dark, these days. The city guard in this part of the city had started grabbing people out after sunset and putting them in a cell overnight for their own 'safety'. It was an open secret a few silvers would get you out of the situation, which made the whole affair yet another tax in everything but name. Angry as the thought made me, Mazus and his cronies were far beyond my reach. And not why I was out tonight, regardless. I made it to the edge and stood up, clenching my fists. Gods, I was already shaking. I felt sick in my stomach and my legs were jelly. It wasn't even that tall a drop, I knew, and still somehow it felt like a knife at my throat.

"Your hands are trembling."

I yelped and jumped, would have fallen if the woman who'd spoken hadn't caught my wrist at the last moment. Whoever she was she was tall and slender, though in the dark I couldn't make out much of her face. Nothing, really, save for the eyes. A pale blue, almost silvery.

"I'm not a thief," I hastily told the stranger. "I live here!"

"So I assumed," the woman replied, and dragged me out of danger before withdrawing a few steps.

Shit, if this got out to the matron I was going to get it. Already I'd been caught trading essays with Julie, two strikes the same week would have my buttocks tanned for an hour.

"I don't think you're supposed to be up here either," I said. "So let's just call this a wash for the both us, right? I'll go, you'll go. Ships in the night."

"More ironic an offer than you know," the stranger replied. "Sate my curiosity first. You are obviously terrified of heights. Why do you seek out the edge?"

I grimaced.

"Look, it's not exactly illegal to do this," I defensively replied.

Maybe. I wasn't sure, and asking would have raised suspicions.

"I care little for such things," the woman said. "You were asked a question, Catherine Foundling."

Oh, this was bad. She knew my fucking name. It wasn't like there were a lot of Deoraithe bastards in the House if she'd been intending on tattling, but that she actually knew my name was a bad sign all around. My teeth clenched and I reluctantly gave ground.

"It's not about standing," I said. "It's about how long I can make myself stay."

"Yet your fear has not ended, has it?"

I shook my head.

"Maybe I'll always be afraid of it," I said. "But that's not what matters. Every time I come, I stay a little longer."

"It gets easier?" the woman curiously asked.

"No," I murmured. "But I get better at handling it. And one day I'll get good enough it won't matter if I'm afraid."

There was a long moment of silence between us.

"Nature is not so easily overcome," the stranger finally said.

I snorted.

"We're people, aren't we?" I said. "Not beasts. We can learn. It's just hard and unpleasant and never as clear-cut as we'd like."

"But will you?" the stranger asked.

—

Kilian was asleep. The public celebration after the Battle of Liesse had been subdued: there were too many dead people in the city for it to be otherwise. Heiress' devils had slain hundreds before a shouted technicality had turned them irrelevant. Still, in the camps outside the city the Fifteenth had raucously feasted its latest victory. My evening with my lover had been a different sort of celebration, though. I'd died today, and that had lent an urgency to our bedplay that was harsher than our usual fare. She'd understood, though, that it was as much about being alive as it was about pleasure. Kilian knew me better than most, and in ways not even my closest friends did. Still, after she fell asleep I'd remained restless. I padded barefoot away from our bed and poured myself a cup of Vale summer wine, the sweet taste filling my mouth. I nursed the same glass for the better part of an hour, seated by the window. The night was warm, for this time of the year, and in the distance I could see the campfires of my legion. The candles lit suddenly, and that was my only warning Kilian had awakened. She sat up in the bed, face shrouded by shadows and her body only half-covered by the sheets.

"Still awake?" she asked.

"Can't seem to close my eyes," I admitted. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"These things happen," she languidly shrugged.

For a moment, in the penumbra of the room, I thought her eyes were pale blue. It must have been a trick of the light.

"You died today," Kilian continued quietly. "A little restlessness is to be expected."

"All part of the plan," I ruefully said. "Try as I might, I couldn't find another way through."

"There were risks," she said. "If you had not succeeded as taking your resurrection from the Choir, there would have been no salvation."

"But I did," I replied, uneasily.

It had occurred to me that I'd not so much gamble with my life as thrown it away and then gambled on a resurrection. Recklessness ran in my veins, and in the heat of the moment it had all felt right, but in the cold light of the aftermath I was beginning to grasp how close I'd come to disaster.

"If you hadn't," Kilian softly asked, "would it have been worth it?"

I looked at her, blinking in surprise.

"If I'd failed?" I mused. "William would have turned us into Hashmallim puppets or Heiress would have killed everyone in the city. There was no room for mistakes."

"I misspoke," my lover said. "If it had all worked save for the resurrection, would that have been a fair price?"

It was, I thought, a sharp question but not an unworthy one. I'd schemed this with the notion in mind that I should be breathing by the end of it, but there would be fights ahead where I might not have that luxury. If the price for this had been that I'd disappear or return as some undead abomination, would I still have taken the bargain?

"There's about a hundred thousand people in Liesse," I eventually said. "More, with the soldiers that came to defend it. They'd be dead or worse, if I didn't take the bargain anyway."

"Cities can be rebuilt," Kilian said. "Fresh children are born with every heartbeat."

"But I only live once, is that it?" I smiled, looking out the window. "I appreciate the sentiment, I really do, but if all I wanted was to live I'd be a tradeswoman in Laure. Not the Squire."

"There is a middle ground," my lover chided, "between sacrifice and obscurity."

"By taking up the knife, I signed away that kind of thinking," I honestly replied. "The power's not the point, Kilian, it's just a way to handle the responsibilities. To take it but ignore why I did in the first place would make all of this meaningless."

"A fair price, then," Kilian mused, eyes hooded.

"Oh, the opposite of fair," I softly disagreed. "One life against a hundred thousand? That's a steal, by any account."

"I do wonder," she said, and I caught the glimmer of silver in her eyes, "how many times a blade can go through the crucible before breaking."

—

"Victory should taste better than this," I said.

Akua's Folly lay before us in all its raging horror. Masego had warded the surroundings, but there was no hiding the mass of wights still haunting the ruins of Liesse. The bottle of aragh in my hand was no comfort, but at least it was *something*. Anything was better than stillness of the cold I'd used to forge myself anew. I held it up for Hakram to take, but he shook his head. He was impossibly hard to make it out in the dark of night, shrouded in a way my fae sight should have ignored. I was still new to this, though. There might be a

trick to it. That I sometimes thought his eyes to be blue was evidence enough either the liquor had struck deep or I was using my not-eyes wrong.

"Two bottles are enough, I think," the orc mildly said.

"A hundred wouldn't be," I shrugged. "But two will have to do. Ratface only has so many on hand, and it will be weeks before we reach a city."

"We lingered here longer than I expected," Hakram agreed. "I would have thought the morning after your conversation with the Carrion Lord would see us march."

"There are still so many things to do," I said. "And it's only the start, isn't it?"

"You have the power to make changes now," the orc said. "Real changes. Necessary ones."

"Do I?" I said. "I could drown bastion in ice with a snap of my fingers, but what does that accomplish? So few of our problems can be solved with strength."

"Yet without it, we would have no right to change anything at all," Adjutant said.

"It's a pretty song," I said. "But it rings false. Having a mantle isn't power, Hakram. It's just a bigger hammer. Gods, I was taught by a man claiming only a speck of what I hold and he terrorized half the continent for decades."

"You are not him," the orc shrugged.

"No," I agreed in a murmur. "No I am not. He would have been appalled by the amount of shortcuts we're going to take."

"Results-"

"Will have diminishing returns," I interrupted. "We don't have the foundation. That's the part that will fuck us. And it's too late to raise it, so we'll have to rely on strength to keep it all together. That makes us fragile in a way I can do nothing about."

"I do not understand your meaning," the orc admitted.

I passed a hand through my hair, except Masego had told me it wasn't really hair anymore.

"The east and the west," I said. "Procer and Praes. The people at the top, they're not there just because they can swing a sword real hard, are they? Malicia and Black won their civil war, but they haven't been knifed since because they have *support*. That's where their power springs from. Cordelia Hasenbach has troubles with her princes, sure, but she's also got a coalition behind her. The weight of customs and laws. Legitimacy, in a word. They all rose up the hard way."

"So did we," Adjutant replied, cocking his head to the side with eerie grace.

I snorted.

"Who's behind us, Hakram?" I said "A handful of Callowan nobles, halfheartedly and for lack of better options. Our army. Malicia will turn on us son enough, and Black's in the wind. We took too many shortcuts."

"Your reputation has weight with the people," the orc said.

"That's not stable," I said. "Because if a Fairfax makes an unpopular decision, they're still a Fairfax. There's unrest, but it holds together. I'm a godsdamned warlord. I mean, Hasenbach outright told me didn't she? No one wants to deal with me because I'm essentially a Callowan Dread Empress in their eyes. This is the very thing that'll come around to bite us after the Battle of the Camps: if fear and force and reputation are the pillars of my reign, the moment one of them comes tumbling down it all follows. And instead of recognizing that, admitting my limitations, I'll double down and head for *Keter* of all places."

"Tyrants are rulers as well, Catherine," Hakram reminded me.

"And tyranny is the best I can manage, isn't it?" I said. "Well-meaning, but still that. The thing is, by now I know I'm not good at this. I could barely handle the Ruling Council when it was stacked in my favour with Black standing behind me. And still a month from now I'm going to put on a crown."

Hakram looked surprised at my words, for some reason.

"You would surrender authority entirely, then?" he asked.

"I should never have been queen," I said. "At most a temporary regent while looking for a better candidate. There are things I'm good at, but ruling isn't one of them. I should have put my effort to those instead and left the crown to someone suited for it."

"And what it is that you're good at, if not this?" Hakram pressed.

"Breaking things," I said. "Facing the monsters so that the real work can take place behind me. I should have talked with Cordelia, I-"

My fingers clenched around the bottle.

"- I *haven't* talked with Cordelia at all," I said. "Not yet."

"No," Hakram said in someone else's voice, "you had not."

—

There were some who might have called this a triumph.

It'd been a victory beyond my rights to expect, anyway. Legions of enemy drow, some of the finest Mighty in the Everdark and even the two-faced goddess herself: they had come, and they had died. Great Strycht had died with them, along with too many drow to count. How many of the corpses down below belonged to nisi, I wondered? There were too many dead for most of them to be Mighty, or even dzulu. The way I'd killed Sve Noc... I frowned, unable to remember the details. I must still be digesting the Night, it would take some time before my mind was in order again. Still, the aftermath was clear enough. Streaks of Winter still running wild through a city older than the kingdom of my birth, warbands of roving blue-eyed dead led by my expanded Peerage stamping down the last of the resistance. I had exactly what I'd come for, didn't I? An entire race made into an army, or close enough. All it had taken was massacre upon massacre upon massacre. If there was any justice in the world my hands would dyed scarlet red, but when had justice last made itself heard? No, down here there was only us – and justice was whatever we said it was.

Archer's steps were light, but not so light that I did not hear or recognize them. Her gait was well-known to me. She stood at the edge by my side, not deigning to sit with her legs dangling in the void like I did. To think I'd been afraid of heights, once. Now I could grow wings with the slightest exertion of will – and there would be more tricks, when the whole of the Night was known to me. Millennia of slaughter in the dark, every ugly parcel made my own. I'd gained more than mere troops by coming to the Everdark.

"Still brooding, I see," Indrani said.

I did not turn to meet her gaze.

"Contemplating consequences," I said. "This was no small thing we did today."

"That's always the way," Indrani dismissed. "There's only one question that matters – now what?"

"Now they take the oaths," I said. "The Mighty, anyway. I'm still debating how many of the dzulu should."

"And we go home," she wistfully said.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I made them my responsibility, 'Drani. All of them. I can't just take my army and leave the rest to die by dwarf."

"They can't go to Callow, Catherine," Indrani said. "It would end the kingdom to have that many foreign settlers."

"That was never the plan," I snorted. "Gods, Callow? It can barely even tolerate Praesi and greenskins that fought three campaigns to defend it. No, they need a home of their own."

"Where?" Archer asked, and I raised an eyebrow at her voice.

It had echoed strangely. There were old magics in this place I had barely begun to understand – and perhaps never would.

"If we leave them in the mountains above this, they'll starve," I said. "You saw how they feed themselves – they need lakes, they need fields."

"The Principate of Pracer," Indrani said. "That'll be difficult. How much of it could you even take, reasonably?"

"Are you drunk already?" I frowned. "Procer, you tart. And that's a recipe for disaster, anyway. They'd be in constant war with the surviving princes, assuming the additional chaos doesn't just collapse the place and allow the Dead King to roll through it. No, there's only one place that can really work. If we play it right, we can even get most the continent to back us in the war."

"Praes," Archer guessed.

"Keter," I contradicted. "The Kingdom of the Dead."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"That was in poor taste," Indrani said.

"Think for a moment," I said. "Neshamah just declared war on every Good nation on this continent. Even if the Grand Alliance could beat him – which, to be honest, I have my doubts about – Procer pretty much ends as a nation from the beating it'll take in the process. And even if they do drive him back, as long as he's not *permanently* dead what was accomplished? He'll have lost a

few dead heroes, a few undead armies. Nothing he can't grow back given long enough. But this? It offers Cordelia another way. A long-term solution."

I breathed out slowly.

"If the drow settle in the Kingdom of the Dead, they can be the lid on the bottle of awful that is the Dead King," I said. "With the oaths, Procer doesn't have to worry about invasion from the fresh Evil nation at its northern border. And if the drow thrive? All the better. A stronger cork means Neshamah will never be able to get out. Sold like this, if we come to the Grand Alliance when they've grown desperate? They'll sign. Or they'll split, because I don't see the First Prince throwing away half her country no matter what her allies say."

"It is a blighted, poisonous wasteland," Indrani said.

"We have Hierophant," I flatly said. "And the same mages that burned a fucking pass through the Whitecaps. The whole priesthood of the west, too. Hells, we do this the right way we might even get most the heroes on board. There have to be a few of them that aren't useless at everything but killing. We can make the place livable, there's no doubt. Besides, we camped up north and the land there was fine. It's mostly the south and centre that are poisonous."

"But first we go to war," Archer said.

"As little as we can," I said. "We gate in, bring Black home no matter what he's up to or wants – this is too delicate a situation to let him meddle. Then I go to Hasenbach with the Accords and the settlement plan. I'd rather not twist her arm if I can avoid, but I'll sack cities if I have to. And after that, we make war on the King of Death. All the continent, if we can manage it, against Neshamah."

"Ambitious," Indrani mused.

I paused and turned.

"You're not Archer," I said. "She would have gotten bored halfway through that."

"No," Andronike said. "We are not."

The two of them were standing at the edge, looking down at my… dream? Was I dreaming? I couldn't remember going to sleep. The last thing I could remember, actually, was – *Ibreathedmydesperatelastbreathclawingatthedark*. I shivered. Night had fallen.

"Am I dead?" I softly asked.

"At the threshold," Komena said. "Not quite through."

"Then this was my last conversation," I said. "Would have mouthed off more if I'd known."

"Are you not going to beg?" Andronike said.

I laughed.

"Again?" I said. "The first time didn't work, why would the second?"

"The nerezim are on the march," Komena said. "You struck bargain with them."

"I did," I agreed. "Not that the oath would hold me anymore. We saw to that."

"They cannot be defeated in battle," the younger Sve Noc said. "We have seen this. They have… grown in the years since our last wars. Beyond even our ability."

"Scary talk, coming from a goddess," I murmured.

"And how would you meet this threat, Catherine Foundling?" Andronike asked.

I blinked.

"Me?" I said. "Who would you care what I think? You two rapscallions eviscerate me and took my stuff without too much trouble, give or take a few pleas."

"You have proved to possess a form of low cunning," Komena said.

"I'm dying, you know," I chided. "You could at least be nice about it."

"You evade," Andronike said. "Cease."

I waved a careless hand.

"Send an envoy to them," I said. "My read on their whole invasion thing is that they're not really interested in your holdings so much as they are in you not being there to trouble their backs. It's the Dead King they want bottled up."

Two pairs of silvery blue eyes remained fixed on me.

"Make a pact," I said. "They give you long enough to evacuate, supplies to survive upstairs for a few months, and in exchange you go after the Kingdom of the Dead. Given that kind of an opportunity, they might even make a grab for the underground of Keter."

"They have not proved amenable to peace offerings before," Andronike said. "Attempts were made, I assure you."

"Because they can't settle the entire rim around the Kingdom of the Dead if there's a chance their lines will collapse because you hit their back," I pointed out. "If you go upstairs and southwest, not only is that threat gone but you've become their first line of defence against the Serenity. I don't care how much they hate you, they'll *want* to take that deal."

They kept staring at me in silence.

"Dangerous," Andronike said.

"Bold," Komena disagreed. "Unorthodox. She was right, heart of my heart. We have grown stiff."

"And it will get worse," her sister murmured.

I rose to my feet.

"I take it this the end, then," I said, looking up at the darkness above us. "Will you make it painless?"

"You should know better by now," Komena idly said, circling around me.

"We have a use for you, Catherine Foundling," Andronike continued, from the other side.

"If we are to return to the Burning Lands, we will need a guide."

"A herald."

"An anchor."

"You offered an act of faith, Losara," Sve Noc smiled. "It did not go unheard."

Their eyes burned pale blue, almost silver.
"Rise, first among the priesthood of Night, and **wake up**."
—
I opened my eyes, shivering with pain and gloriously mortal.

Interlude: Triptych

> "Only one kind of war is ever just, that which is waged on the Enemy."
>
> Extract from ' The Faith of Crowns', by Sister Salienta

Harbour duty was the worst, always had been.

Ines had blown three months' pay on the warmest cloak that could be found at market and still she was shivering like a dying calf. The prince had spread talk through the city that with the Kingdom of the Dead stirring awake those soldiers who guarded the harbour would see better pay, but like most princely promises it had come to nothing. Rumour had it the coin had gone into buying the service of every fantassin company left in the north instead, and much as she hated freezing by the docks Ines had to admit it might have been better investment. The Princess of Hainaut was doing the same, it was said, and the mercenary leanings of the fantassins had turned the whole affair into some sordid bidding war. Still, better to be here at home than to have gone south as some of the prince's soldiers had. What word had come back from the crusade's foray into the Kingdom of Callow was the stuff of nightmares. Strange devils riding to slaughter in the night, an endless horde of orcs and heretics that at the corpses of the fallen. Some more fanciful tales as well, of the Black Queen bringing down the sky on the head of the crusaders and making a lake of their blood. Whatever the truth of it, none of those who'd gone south had returned.

For once, she thought, being fresh to the prince's service had been of some use. It also meant Ines was inevitably handed down the shit duties by her careerist noble officers, but cold fingers were better than the grave. She put a spring to her step after clearing Gertrude's Tongue, hurrying towards the bonfire that awaited near the customs house. There she took off her leather gloves and pressed her palms close to the bronze bowl holding the flames, sighing at the warmth seeping into her bones. The pike she'd left to lean against her should had never seen use out of the training yard, and if the Heavens smiled on her it never would. Still, the silence of the night unsettled her. The winds that'd turned her earlier round into a ghastly affair had since died, leaving behind only eerie stillness. Cleves Harbour was lethargic on the best of days, the sporadic ship trade with Bremen and Lyonis the affair only of the prince and

the very rich, but now even the fishermen had left. That lot had better read on what took place beneath the waters of the Tomb than anyone else, it was said. Those among them that did not learn to listen to the sound of danger were dragged into the depths by the foul creatures that were the only true rulers of the lake.

Some nights, Ines wondered why the prince even bothered to assign guards to the harbour. Empty as it was, even if some dead mean took it that would be no great loss. The royals who'd founded Cleves had been a farsighted lot: the harbour was not connected to the capital proper. The thin stripe of docks and shore was walled with an eye at keeping the enemy *inside*, not out, an unspoken admission that if the Dead King raided past the lake there would be no holding it against the Hidden Horror's armies. The slope descending to the shore meant Ines could not even catch a glimpse of Cleves itself from where she now stood, not behind those tall walls, but that part she hardly minded. It would be the hour-long walk back to the barrack of the capital she was not looking forward to, especially since some enterprising noble lad had decided that the length of that trip should no longer be counted as part of guard duty's duration. Ines' only comfort was that if the fucking dead actually showed up, that prick was bound to end up on the bad side of an unfortunate crossbow accident. The lad should have worried less about getting commendations from up high and more about the many people in charge of sharp objects he'd made enemies of.

With an aggrieved sigh Ines put her gloves back on. She'd lingered around the fire as much as she could justify, if the next guard came up while she was still here she'd end up with another black mark on her record. Merciful Gods, though, it was a cold night. And not even winter solstice yet, it'd only get worse. She glanced to the side and upwards, at the slender tower overlooking the waters. She didn't know who Mikhail had paid off to get that particular cushy duty – the guard tower had a bonfire up top, and a seat – but the man could certainly afford it. The Lycaonese immigrant ran a little business on the side, providing hard drink warming the bones to the guards that could afford it. Ines had always disdained the practice, but the thought of the long walk back to the city after her duty had her reconsidering for tonight. Once wasn't going to hurt anyone, was it?

"You still up here, you filthy Bremen throwback?" she called out.

No answer. He must have been indulging in his own wares, which was bold of him. There were only so many times he could bribe his way out of the trouble that'd come down on his head if he was caught. Taking her pike in hand, Ines decided against taking the lack of answer as a sign from Above. The thought of a warm belly had grown on her with the consideration. She strode to the bottom of the tower, finding the door ajar. Sloppy of him, she frowned, even if he was drunk. The twisting stairs leading up to the top were just a brisk walk, but when she came there a cold seized her that the fire could do nothing about. Sergeant Mikhail was there: throat opened, blood all over his mail. *Oh Gods*,

she thought. *We're under attack*. She would have rung the bell the tower had been equipped with for this very reason, but the bloody thing was gone. Ripped off the metal hinges that had held it up. She leaned over the edge, casting her voice.

"Attack," she screamed. "We're under attack!"

There was no answer. She wasn't loud enough, that was why they had the damned bells in the first place. For all she knew, she was the only soldier in the harbour left alive. That would make it her duty to run back to the city, wouldn't it? So that they were warned. It wasn't abandoning her fellows, it was doing her duty. Her hands trembled around the shaft of the pike.

"Damn it," she whispered. "Damn it."

She ran back down the stairs, heading for the nearest tower. There were ten in the harbour, they couldn't have castrated all of them unseen. Her old boots slipped against the frost and she fell, but she grit her teeth and picked up her pike before picking herself up with it. Dodderer's Height wasn't far, and as the largest of the towers it'd have fielded more than a single sentinel. Old, fat ones one the edge of retiring from service but there was strength in numbers. She made it past the jutting empty warehouse that was the Prince of Cleves' personal property and cleared the corner before she saw it. Five corpses, tossed down from the tower onto the pavement below. She glanced up, eyes squinting in the dark, but thank the Gods the bell was still there. Whoever'd done this had not yet ripped it out. Whoever had done this was likely still here, she then thought. Gloved fingers tightened around her pike, she grit her teeth and ran once more. Her attention had been on the tower, though. That was why she missed it.

The undead climbed out of the lakewater, glistening wet under starlight. Rivulets dripped down the bare skull under the ancient helm and it advanced without a word. Ines yelled out in fear, but she'd trained. Feet wide but steady, she struck out with her pike. It pierced through the rusty mail, going straight into the body, and for a moment she tasted triumph. Then the dead thing began pushing towards her through, embracing the impalement. She dropped the pike in ear, immediately cursing herself for it. But it was slower than her, she realized, so she ran for the tower instead of fighting. All she needed was to ring the bell. The door was ajar, she saw, and she slowed to avoid slipping on a patch of ice. Just in time to watch a pair of armoured skeletons walk out of the tower, swords in hand. Blocking the entrance.

"*No*," she hissed.

What could she do? She didn't even have a – the two undead were smashed to pieces by the same swing of a silvery sword. There was a man, tanned and wearing plate, who casually brought down a steel-clad boot to smash one of the skulls. The undead she'd fled from was tossed back into the lake by some giant shadow moving quick as lightning. For a moment Ines thought she glimpsed fur and fangs, but what wolf could possibly be so large?

"Ring the bell, soldier," the man in plate said.

His eyes were wreathed with light, she saw as she faced him. No, with *Light*.

"Chosen," she croaked out.

"Go," he said. "Your courage tonight did not go unnoticed."

"They're all over the place," Ines said. "If they're here-"

"Cleves," a woman's voice said, "does not stand alone."

A face of painted stone over a cloak, long tresses swinging behind. Another favoured child of the Heavens, she would put her hand to fire over it.

"It will be a long night," the first Chosen said. "A long month after it, until Malanza arrives. But we *will* hold."

"Ring the bell, soldier," the masked Chosen said. "We will guard you. Tonight, the Dead King learns that dawn is not so easily snuffed out."

Ines straightened her back. She was no proud Lycaonese, to find glory in dying spitting in the Enemy's eye. Just some fool girl someone had shoved a pike in the hands of. But she'd been born in Cleves. The principality of her birth was a bloody mess, and she thought little of the man who ruled it, but that wasn't the point. It was her home. This was *Procer*. They could lose to princes and princesses, they could lose to Arlesites and Lycaonese, but she'd be damned before a fucking undead abomination flew its banner over the city.

She took up a sword from a corpse and climbed to ring the bell.

—

Balasi was allowed into the tent by the sentinels without so much as a second glance.

It still surprised him, this. Had he tried the same with his lover's rooms in Nenli he would have been met at sword point and taken to the city square for a public flogging. Here, though, the campaign had made the king's laws grow lax. He might not be consort in name, but he was in deed and the soldiers acted accordingly. The seeker of deeds had since grown to suspect that this was one of the reason why Sargon had come forward to claim command over the Fourteenth Expansion. Back home their love would always be an illegal mismatch, but so far away from the Kingdom Under the rules had thinned. Sargon was not sleeping, as it happened. The Herald of the Deeps sat still as stone with his eyes closed as he sought council with the spirits bound to his staff. The Souls of Fire were known to hold wisdom, though a kind narrow in scope. Were they too clever the Kings Under the Mountains would have slaughtered them all, not bound them to the great forges. There would be need to dig deep again, after this land was claimed, to feed the fresh forges being raised. Many spirits would still lie asleep in their beds of molten rock, unknown to the *kraksun*.

"Delein," Balasi quietly said. "There is need of you."

Sargon's eyes fluttered open.

"Balasi," he murmured. "I was far gone, this time. What ails you?"

"Not me," he replied. "All of us. And if that vein is true or hollow has yet to be known."

"Speak," the Herald of the Deeps frowned.

"Our borrowed knife has returned," the dwarf said. "And would now speak with you."

Sargon's beard twitched in surprise.

"The Gloom still stands," he said. "She cannot have been victorious. Are we certain it is the human, and not simply a Night-thing wearing her?"

"I laid eyes on her myself," Balasi said. "She was stripped of power, but it is her. Unmistakeably."

"And the cold spirit?" Sargon asked, leaning forward.

The seeker of deeds resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His lover had fancied the thing since their first meeting, considering adding it to his staff should the human queen be broken. Sargon had mastered the Greed in most aspects of his life, but not this: any interesting creature he encountered he desired for his staff of office.

"Changed, yet still existing," he replied. "You can look upon it yourself when speaking with the human."

"She is not that," the Herald of the Deeps said. "You know this."

"Was not, perhaps," Balasi conceded. "I am no longer certain of that old truth."

That piqued his lover's interest, as he'd intended, and Sargon merely put on a coat before they made their way out. Officer had been ordered to settle the human and her spirit until they were ready to be met, and the two dwarves found them awaiting patiently by a low table. Black kasi had been served, and the Queen of Callow was drinking from her cup with a broad grin. Hairless of the face like so many of her kind, some feeble thing grown even feebler since their last meeting. It had not escaped his notice that she sat in a way that took the weight off one of her legs, as if it were wounded. Or that she'd limped visibly when coming to the camp. The spirit stood behind her, dark and silent. Its face had changed, grown more human. Scarlet eyes had become golden, though no less watchful for it. Sargon's eyes lingered on it with interest, ever eager to get his hands on fresh curiosities.

"Herald," the human said, inclining her head in shallow respect. "Seeker. Good to see you again."

Balasi stood as Sargon sat across the table, only then doing the same. A mere seeker of deeds could not be seated at the same time as the Herald of the Deeps, he thought, bitterness so old and worn it was hardly even that anymore.

"You surprise me, Queen Catherine," Sargon said. "I had not thought we would meet again until our bargain was fulfilled."

And such an advantageous one it had been, Balasi thought. A paltry quantity of gold and a temporary cessation of arms sales to a few human nations, in exchange for a sword pointed at the heart of the Night. Sargon had struck it most willingly, knowing that even if defeated the human would drag many *kraksun* down with her.

"That still holds," the human idly replied. "I'm here to settle some details, as it happens. The Gloom could be gone by the end of this conversation, if it is fruitful."

The dwarf's brow twitched. A bold claim, this. Sve Noc still lived, this was known. Was the human claiming she had bound the old monster to her will?

"Details," Sargon repeated. "Such as?"

"An offer might be more accurate," the human mused. "Sve Noc is willing to cede her current territory to the Kingdom Under, but concessions will have to be made."

Balasi smoothly reached for the blade at his side. He'd let down his guard, when sensing the queen had been stripped of her power. Where before she had been an oppressive presence without even moving a finger, she now felt light as a feather. Nothing more than a mortal, he'd thought. *So why do you feel more dangerous now than you did before, human?*

"You were turned," he said. "Made into their creature."

The queen made that strange human sound of derision, all nose and doubt.

"I'm really more of an advisor," she said. "We came to an arrangement, that's all. Trust was extended, and part of that is letting me speak for them when it comes to you fine folk."

"You no longer hold power," the Herald of the Deeps said.

"I wield it instead," the human said. "That's quite enough, as far as I'm concerned."

"You fed your purpose to them," Sargon said, openly appalled.

"Purpose was shared," Queen Catherine corrected. "As I would now share a proposition with you."

"There can be no truce with the Night," Balasi said.

"The Night is dead," the human said. "At least the way you knew it. And I am here to speak diplomacy, not theology."

"And what *terms*," Sargon scoffed, "would Sve Noc speak?"

She took out her pipe, taking her time to fill it with herbs. Snapping her wrist, she produced dark flames from the tip of her fingers to light it. It did not feel like sorcery to Balasi's senses, and this was worrying. She puffed at the dragonbone – what a waste, he still thought, to make a *pipe* of that – and blew out a stream of smoke.

"Would you like," Catherine Foundling cheerfully asked, "to make your two biggest problems go at war with each other?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I am listening," the Herald of the Deeps said.

—

Friedrich Papenheim might have been a prince, in another life.

Of those who had both the name and the blood, he was the closest relation to the Iron Prince. He'd served as a trusted lieutenant to Klaus Papenheim for decades as a steward and commander, and few others were as high in the man's council as he. But Old Klaus had made it known he intended to pass on

Hannoven to his niece when he died, to make the principality as one with her own. Friedrich had resented this, on occasion, though always half-heartedly. It was hard to be truly bitter when one lost one's inheritance to the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach. The first Lycaonese to ever rise as First Prince of Procer, the iron-willed daughter of the ancient lines of Papenheim and Hasenbach who'd made the entire south submit to her rule. No, if he was to be royalty but not prince there was none other he'd rather lose the throne to. It would be in good hands, when the time came. Tonight, though? Tonight Hannoven was in his own hands, and it was *burning*.

He'd kept to the old ways. As soon as it was known that the Dead King was stirring he'd expelled every southerner from the city and hung those that refused the order. Every village and town in sight of the waters had been emptied, the spring armories had been opened and the war horns sounded. Every man and woman of fighting age in the principality had been called to serve, to uphold the old oaths. The whispers had passed from mouth to ear, spreading across all of Hannoven. *The dead are coming. Belt your swords, put on your armour, send your children south. The dead are coming.* He'd never been half as proud to be Lycaonese as when he'd watched the full muster of his people spread out like a sea of steel beneath the walls of the city. The watchtowers by the Grave had found the Dead King's host as it crossed, marching under the dark waters with the inevitability of an arrow in flight, but he was no fool to give the horde battle on open field. There could be no victory when every one of your dead turned to the service of the Enemy.

He'd sent riders to the other principalities, Rhenia and Bremen and Neustria. He trusted no sorcery to carry the word when the Hidden Horror itself strode the field. The allies of Hannoven were of the old blood too, and they'd smelled the death on the wind: they would not be caught with their trousers around their ankles like some goat-fucking Alamans. Their armies would already be assembled, and the moment the message arrived they'd sound their war horns to send for full service. But it would be weeks, months before the first reinforcements arrived. The city of his birth was a fortress like few others, but it would not hold forever. And so he'd made the cold choice, as he had been taught from the cradle. Those unfit to fight had begun the march for Bremen with everything they could carry. With them had gone half the muster of Hannoven. He'd sent the young, the skilled, the promising. The future of his principality. With him Friedrich had kept old soldiers past their prime, the greybeards and whitehairs who did not know whether it was winter cold or ratling fang that would slay them. And with those he had fought for Hannoven.

Fifteen thousand against the legions dark and darkly led. They taught the Dead King what kind of people got to grow *old* in these lands. The first wall they lost on the first day, and retreated after setting the houses aflame. They held the second wall for a week, until the dead sent a flock of winged drakes aflight. Wall by wall they have ground, but never without making the Enemy pay for it. The longer they held the longer the rest of the Lycaonese had to gather their

armies, the longer the people of Hannoven could flee without pursuit. They fought for a month and seven nights, dying in the snow as a sea of dead lapped at the walls. Hundreds of thousands, centuries of corpses marching to bring death to all the world. In the end it came down to the Old Fortress, the solitary mountain that had been turned into a castle jutting out from the plains. The dead never paused in the assault, never tired: day and night they came in silent assault, the banner of the Dead King flying tall behind them. It mattered not, for behind Friedrich the banner of Hannoven flew. A single soldier on the wall, grey on blue. Beneath was writ the words thrown in the Enemy's teeth since time immemorial: *And Yet We Stand*.

So they stood, and so they died.

Ground away into nothing by numbers and sorcery their few mages could not match. Dead things that had once been Chosen climbed the walls, the sky grew dark with falling of arrows and behind them drakes stolen from the grave spewed out clouds of poison that burned lungs and skin. Less than a thousand of them left now, and most of them wounded. They'd retreated to the Crown, the very highest point of the fortress that could only be accessed by a few narrow paths filled with murderholes. The dead had been met with streams of burning coals and thrown oil, dwarven engines roaring destruction down passages where there could be had no cover. The Chosen dead pushed through, after the horde withdrew, but they found the passages collapsing beneath them and spiked grids of steel awaiting them when they leapt. Now sorcerers that were little more than grinning skulls pounded away at the defences with foul magics, forcing the defenders to stay behind cover until the next wave of dead was ready for assault. Friedrich passed through the throng of wounded, clasping shoulders and trading grim boasts with what soldiers her had left.

Old men, old women. The last gasps of their generation, dying sword in hand. His eyes grew cloudy with pride. Death came to all, but tonight they would meet it as Lycaonese should. Holding the wall in the face of the Enemy, for the sake of all the world. Friedrich beard was already flecked with blood, and he dipped out of sight when he felt the cough came. It would not do for his soldiers to know he was dying. The wound he'd taken hammering a spike through the head of that last drake had only gotten worse. Poison, he suspected, though it made no difference. None of them would live to see dawn, poisoned or not. He wiped his lips clean of blood and returned to the battlements after the cough had passed. The pounding had stopped, he immediately noticed. The assault was coming. Captain Heiserech sought him out, her worn face seemingly amused.

"Commander," she saluted. "The skulls want to talk. They sent some kind of giant dead. Think it might be 'Ol Bones himself come to pay us a visit."

"Has he now?" Friedrich grinned. "Well, let us see what the Dead King has to say."

Maybe he'd ask for surrender. His people could certainly use the laugh. He wasn't sure who started. It could have been anyone, or half a dozen at the

same time. Only a few voices, at first, but more joined until the stone shook with sound.

"The moon rose, midnight eye
Serenaded by the owl's cry
In Hannoven the arrows fly."

The refrain came as a roar of defiance.

"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."

Friedrich Papenheim strode to the very edge of the battlements, where the passages had been broken, and found a horror awaiting on the other side of the drop. It was large as three men, wearing plate of bronze and steel that had been nailed to its frame. Its face could not be glimpsed behind the great helm, but the eyes could. Sunken yellow things, glinting with power. That might be the old bastard himself in the flesh, Friedrich thought. The song echoes from behind him, slipping into the wind.

"*No southern song for your ear*
No pretty lass or merry cheer
For you only night and spear."

"A Papenheim," the Dead King mildly said. "I should have known. Your entire line is like a nail that refuses to be hammered."

Friedrich could not deny the sliver of pride he felt at that. He was dying, but he would stand straight in the face of the Enemy. Even if his lungs throbbed with pain.

"In the name of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, I bid you to crawl back into the hole that spawned you," Friedrich said. "And to take your horde of damned with you, old thing."

"I rather missed this city," the Dead King said. "You make it harder to take every time, it keeps things interesting."

"And when we chase you back into the dark, claiming it back, we'll raise an eight wall," the Lycaonese replied with bared teeth. "On it will be written: here lie those who broke the back of the Enemy and stand those who will again."

"*Come rats and king of dead*
Legions dark, and darkly led
What is a grave if not a bed?"

"You fought well," the Hidden Horror said. "And so were owed the courtesy of this conversation. Should your soldiers wish to take their own lives instead of having them taken, I will allow them the right."

"So that we may rise whole in your service?" he laughed. "I think not. We'll burn, and you with us."

"Once wolves," the Dead King said, almost fondly, "always wolves. What soldiers you would have made, under my banner. Die proud, then, Papenheim. You were an irritation."

"*Quell the tremor in your hand*
Keep to no fear of the damned

They came ere, and yet we stand."

The aging soldier smiled.

"We'll be waiting for you at the passes, Dead King," he promised. "With a proper Lycaonese welcome."

"I would expect no less," the Hidden Horror said.

He turned his back on the Enemy and returned to stand with the last of his soldiers, the words in the wind guiding him home.

"*So we'll hold the wall,*

Lest dawn fail."

When the light of day found Hannoven, not a single living soul remained.

Bonus Chapter: Epilogue

> "By hook and crook we will all hang, High Lords, from a noose woven of our many loose ends. But cheer up: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of us. Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun."
>
> Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

Anaxares pricked his hand and cursed.

Damn needle. It must have been made in Penthes, as wantonly treacherous as the rest of those Wicked Foreign Oligarchs. He wiped off the droplet of blood and got back to the work of sewing back on the bottom of his shoe. Servants kept offering him increasingly perfidious boots, and he was certain the pair made of solid gold had been the result of what passed for the Tyrant's sense of humour, but he'd continued pretending blindness long enough they'd eventually desisted. He would have preferred to go without shoes at all, if he could, as he'd not been granted the right to use the foreign product by a proper committee, but three days of bleeding feet had eventually dissuaded him. He'd bought an old pair with the last silvers from his begging bowl, but the march was using them sorely. Anaxares had grown to hate walking a great deal lately. He'd never done so much of it during his years as a diplomat, and never in a locale so insistently hostile. He'd heard a bush had eaten a soldier, last night, swallowed the man whole when he went to relieve himself. There was hardly a piece of the Waning Woods that was not out to kill everything it saw.

The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities finished sowing his shoes back together at the cost of only minor wounds, which sadly he could not even consider had been taken in service to the Republic. The People had cut him off, sent him adrift. Worse yet, their elected representatives sometimes requested his advice. *His advice*. As if he were not some wretched despot. He'd immediately reported the people involved to the nearest kanenas for treason against the Will Of The People, their horrid attempts to involve a duplicitous Named into the affairs of Glorious Bellerophon marking a dark day. *Advice*, Gods. A dark day indeed. He slipped on his shoes and began looking for an acceptable spot to dig a hole to sleep in. League dignitaries had alleged there was a tent he was meant to sleep in, but he'd closed his eyes and hummed until they went away.

Sadly straying too far from the camp would see him encircled by heavily-armed soldiers keeping a vigil, so he'd have to stay within the bounds even though the very notion made his skin crawl. There was a patch of tepid, mostly dry earth far enough from a fire he wouldn't be implicitly agreeing with its existence, and there Anaxares knelt and drew back his sleeves. He was out of silvers and so could not trade for a shovel, meaning he'd have to dig by hand.

It shouldn't take more than a few hours, he thought.

"O Mighty Hierarch, Peerless Ruler of all the League and its people-"

"How dare you," Anaxares snarled.

The Tyrant of Helike grinned, draped over a Proceran fainting couch held up by a gaggle of chittering gargoyles.

"I come bearing tribute to your greatness, O Sublime One," Kairos Theodosian said, and ordered one of the gargoyles forward.

It presented Anaxares with a shovel. It was, he could not help but notice, made entirely of rubies. That monster.

"I will report this flagrant attempt of bribery to the proper authorities," Hierarch said.

"Which are?" Tyrant said, leaning forward with interest.

"The Tyrant of Helike," Anaxares reluctantly admitted.

"I expect he will he chide me most thoroughly," the boy mused. "Rumour is he's a real stickler about these things."

"Why do you torment me so, Tyrant?" he sighed.

"Mostly habit, at this point," Kairos confessed. "It's like picking at a wound, once you start it's nigh impossible to stop."

"I will rise above this nonsense," Hierarch said. "I must see to my bedding."

"Did you notice that half the Bellerophan army is standing guard every night?" Tyrant cheerfully asked. "I think they mistook the Tolesian term for ten with the one meaning a thousand in their manual and they've been standing by the mistranslation ever since."

Anaxares' lips thinned, deeply offended at the insinuation that the Republic could ever make such a mistake. Even if they had, which they had not, it would have been a superior interpretation of the original text and inherently better by virtue of having been voted upon by the People. Naturally, as with all matters related to military texts, knowledge of what was voted upon would not have been held by the People as it was illegal for said knowledge to be held by any not having drawn the lot of soldiers. This was only right and proper. But he would not correct the Tyrant's blatantly false assertions, it would only encourage the boy.

"Huh," Kairos said. "I thought for sure that would do it. I suppose all that's left is helping you dig your hole."

Anaxares frowned.

"That would taint the work," he gravely said.

Relying upon foreign labour – which was, by definition, the product of tyranny – without official sanction was treason.

"Then I'd pick up the pace then, if I were you," the Tyrant grinned. "We're about to hold a war council and at this point nobody still believes they'll be able to get you into an actual tent."

The Gods were fickle, and so when the other dignitaries arrived the hole was only ankle-deep. Anaxares sat in in regardless, threadbare cloak pooling around him. The usual despots had crawled out of their ivory towers, it seemed. A two-striped askretis from Delos' Secretariat, a preached from Atalante laden with beads, the young Basileus of Nicae and his former colleague Magister Zoe of Stygia. The two grasping Exarchs of Penthes – they had not succeeded at assassinating or disgracing the other, and so now uneasily shared the mantle of Wanton Tyranny – and finally the dignified figure of Bellerophon's senior, and incidentally only, general. Flanked by kanenas ready to execute him at the first sign of treasonous ambition, he noted with approval. The Delosi askretis broke the silence first, sending one of his scribes for ink and parchment.

"The meaning of your metaphor escapes me, Hierarch," he said, eyeing the barely-visible hole curiously. "Could I trouble you to clarify it for the records?"

"It was not as wet as the ground further out," Anaxares explained.

"Ah," the askretis said, sounding enlightened. "And what does the ground stand for? The wetness?"

"Impiety, clearly," the Atalantian preacher said, clutching her beads. "The Hierarch reminds us of the virtue of humility, chiding us for this vainglorious enterprise."

"It is a hole," Magister Zoe mildly said. "That he is going to sleep in. Like he has every other night so far."

"How like a Stygian to grasp the obvious and only that," the Delosi dignitary scathingly dismissed.

"And so I do declare this session of the war council of the League of Free Cities to have formally begun," the Tyrant cheerfully said.

The crazed boy enjoyed these councils so much, Anaxares thought, largely because no one else did. He'd insisted they be held regularly with the full roster of League dignitaries.

"The Glorious Republic of Bellerophon," the general started, and Hierarch murmured 'First and Greatest of the Free Cities, May She Reign Forever' along with him, "would like to formally protest the opening of hostilities in the Samite Gulf."

"The record will show this," the askretis promised with religious fervour.

"I'll start bothering to listen to your people on the subject of fleets when you actually learn how to swim," the Basileus of Nicae retorted.

Anaxares' back straightened with indignation. This was calumny. The knowledge of how to swim had not been restricted in decades – has never been restricted or not, he immediately mentally corrected – though with good reason showing too much eagerness in learning the skill was considered suspicious.

"I've been led to believe this protest comes too late, regardless," the Tyrant of Helike said.

The young ruler of Nicae grit his teeth.

"Allies," he began, "do not spy on each other, Tyrant."

"Spy?" Kairos said, putting a trembling hand over his heart. "Gods, I would *never*. We merely helped your messengers carry their messages."

"Like anyone believes that," the Basileus sneered.

"Anyhow," Tyrant said, "as I was saying – my spies in the Nicaean ranks tell me the Ashuran fleet was taken by surprise while docked in Arwad and torched before the city itself was sacked."

The ruler of Nicae scoffed.

"Our ships withdrew afterwards," he added. "And are now blockading Smyrna. With the loss of their other fleet in the assault on Thalassina, the Ashurans are now effectively taken out of the war."

"Would the Republic care to protest the blockade a well?" the Delosi dignitary asked.

"Instructions will be sought from the People," the Bellerophan general stoutly replied.

And would be received, Anaxares thought, within the next six months after vote was held. Perhaps along with a suggested order of battle, if the message arrived when they'd entered the lands claimed by the Principate.

"That's all well and good, but the Thalassocracy was never our true worry," Magister Zoe opined. "Last we heard the armies of Levant were marching up Procer, in pursuit of the Carrion Lord. They're the ones we're at risk of encountering."

"This was a glorious victory," the Basileus insisted. "Simply because the Magisterium hardly contributed any ships you would-"

"You kicked the Ashurans while they were down, boy," one of the Penthesian Exarchs said, rolling her eyes. "If the Praesi hadn't slapped them around first we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"The foul empress Malicia struck a blow at all children of the Heavens, that day," the Atalantian preacher said. "Let us not celebrate the death of those taken while serving holy purpose."

"Bead-clutcher," Magister Zoe mocked. "Where was this ambivalence when we planned the invasion of Procer?"

"There is no invasion," Hierarch stated.

There was a moment of silence as all their gazes turned to him. Most of them, he realized, had forgotten he was even there.

"As the Principate of Procer is an assembly of grasping despots having forcefully seized land and authority from its inhabitants, legally speaking there can be no such thing as invasion of it," he clarified.

"Hear hear," the Tyrant grinned. "We are *liberators*, my friends. We undertake the gentle – kindly, even – business of liberating all those pretty Proceran cities. Certainly nothing so uncouth as invasion."

Even true words sounded incorrect coming from the boy's mouth, Anaxares thought. After that the council descended into the usual squabbles. The Penthe-

sians wanted the armies of the League to march swifter through the Waning Woods, shaving days off the week remaining until they entered Iserre. Most other commanders disagreed on basis of such haste opening the soldiers to ambush by the creatures haunting the woods, though Magister Zoe was in agreement with the Exarchs and offered the slave phalanxes as vanguard. As usual, it came to nothing and the dignitaries retreated stewing in the same irritation they had brought with them. The Tyrant made a production of leaving the ruby shovel behind, but eventually followed suit. Anaxares remained in his hole, eyes closed. The visions came to his eyes and ears on the wind, unbidden and unwanted. He could only **Receive** them.

A blind boy treading through a dead city, carrying the deaths with him – lash and ladder, into ever deeper darkness. Armies gathering under mountains, a sea of banners snarling like wolves in the wind. The Augur sitting alone in a frosted garden, spoken whispers still echoing in her ears like a coiling snake. Death marching under water, darkening the sky in flocks, spreading like poison in a legion unending. A grinning woman in the dark smoking a pipe and gathering an army, seen only until pale blue eyes forced the vision to end. Bands of green things crawling out of tunnels swords in hands, silent in the night. A one-eyed orc and a woman dappled with ink, leading an army in flight. But most importantly of all, on some barren shore, a knight in white stood with his sword high. A killer who had taken lives, but never at his own behest. Behind him, looking through a coin, something unfathomable loomed. The Seraphim, Anaxares thought. The Choir of Judgement. The angels who had judged and slain people of the League.

The Hierarch smiled.

For that, they would be judged in turn.

—

Amadeus was bemused.

Upon realizing the depth of his mistake he'd expected swift death to follow, delivered by as many heroes as the opposition could scrape together for a spot of killing on the lake. Part of that had been correct. A band of Named had come after him, girded with Light and wearing the grim rictuses of individuals carrying out a necessary evil – always without the capital, of course, and preferably phrased as the 'greater good' instead. To his continued bafflement, however, they had yet to cut his throat. On one of the rare occasions where he was not put under enchantment to remain inert, mainly when it was deemed necessary that he be fed and allowed to relieve himself, he'd politely inquired to his captors about what kind of second-rate outfit they were running. Really, keeping him prisoner? It was asking for this story to be turned on them, considering the amount of loved ones he still had out there. Unless the Saint of Swords was intent on confessing her deep affections for him – unlikely, since she took great relish in punching him unconscious before enchantments were laid – it was likely someone in the opposition had decided to get *clever* about this.

Hearing out whatever funeral pyre of a plan was behind this ought to be good for a chuckle or two. He was awakened long enough for half-stale bread to be pressed into his hand, and he was left to eat it with the Saint of Swords standing behind him sword unsheathed. Though damnably hungry, Amadeus threw over his shoulder the stickiest crumbs he could find and smilingly excused it as an ancient Wasteland custom he could not eat without. Everyone knew Duni were an ignorant and superstitious lot, after all. Laurence de Montfort replied by clouting him over the ear, which he took as a moral victory. By the looks of their surroundings, they were still keeping to the countryside and avoiding roads and cities. The temperature had significantly cooled, though that could be the result of the turning season just as northwards travel.

"Drink," the Grey Pilgrim said, pressing the gourd to his lips.

Amadeus did. He'd inhabited this body as Named for so long he'd lost the sense of how long it would take for him to become this thirsty under more natural circumstances, but he suspected at least six hours. After, though, he pursued his curiosity.

"You appear to be carrying me north," he said. "And have been for… a fortnight, at least, likely more."

"That is none of your concern," the Pilgrim said, the Levantine roots subtly affecting his pronunciation of Lower Miezan.

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"Are you quite certain," he said, "that you would not prefer to extol your plan to me in great detail?"

He didn't even hear the blow coming. The Saint, he mused when they woke him the following day, did not have much of a sense of humour. He told her as much while picking at his daily bread.

"Think you're funny, do you?" Laurence de Montfort sneered.

He was not, in fact, certain she was sneering. He was facing the wrong way and quite tightly bound, save for his forearms. But given the tone, he would allow himself to presume.

"I have my moments," Amadeus mused. "I did hear this funny jest, from someone very dear to me. It was about this very arrogant woman who had her belly opened and crawled away holding in her guts."

He paused.

"The punchline is that you'll grow old and die, while Hye won't," he helpfully added.

He did not get to finish his bread that evening, by dint of being knocked unconscious. To his amusement, the following night it was another hero standing behind him. The Rogue Sorcerer, he thought, if the old reports of the Eyes had any accuracy to them. Likely the author of the enchantment that kept him slumbering as the others journeyed.

"I've been instructed to put you under spell of silence if you attempt to engage me in conversation," the hero quietly told him.

"That seems unnecessary," Amadeus said. "I am, after all, entirely at your power."

"Pilgrim's orders," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"That is unfortunate," the dark-haired man said. "It is not too late to save your parents."

No reply was given. Amadeus frowned, then yelled as loudly as he could. None of the heroes breaking their fast so much as glanced in his direction. Ah, already under the spell. He had neither heard nor felt the man cast. Interesting. He truly *was* bereft of even the smallest trace of his Name. He flicked a miffed glance at the ground.

"Before my last stand, truly?" he said. "I could have slain a few on my way down, you cheapskates."

Four more evenings, and not once did the Grey Pilgrim do him the courtesy of a morality debate by the fireside. He could respect the professionalism involved, but it was really quite irksome. Three more after that, and once: the last awakening, to his surprise, was in the middle of the night. Someone had botched their enchantment, it seemed. Amadeus found himself quite tightly constrained: manacles on his feet, ropes on his legs, another set of manacles keeping his hands behind his back and what looked like an enchanted band of middle around his chest. Well, they wouldn't take themselves off on their own. He quietly rolled around until his fingers clasped around a somewhat sharp rock, and he considered the manner in which this should be approached. He'd need to dislocate at least one of his arms, and likely a wrist as well. To slip the manacle he'd need blood to ease the way, and that meant cutting open a vein – though he'd need to be careful not to nick an artery, as he was rather troublingly fragile at the moment. Wound first, he decided. It'd be harder to be accurate with the stone if his arm was already dislocated. Shifting his fingers, be began digging the sharp edge into his skin.

"I'm curious," the Wandering Bard said. "After you slip loose, assuming you can, then what?"

Amadeus sighed.

"Debate is still taking place," he replied, "as to whether I should attempt to steal a horse or shove this humble stone through a hero's eye socket."

"Pretty sure Laurence can outrun a horse," the Bard mused.

"*I* can't," he quite reasonably pointed out. "Small steps... what happens to be your name, at the moment?"

"Marguerite of Baillons," the Bard replied.

He snorted.

"Alamans, truly?" he said. "Were all the other bodies taken?"

"Hey, if I could pick I'd be a seven foot tall blonde with a miraculous rack and thighs like trees every single time," the Bard said. "Now *that* was a spin of the wheel. They don't make them like that in Levant anymore."

He moved around, trying to sit, but found himself stuck on the ground. Most unpleasant. The Wandering Bard lent a helping hand, dragging him up, and

he found himself looking at the abomination's latest form. Slender and dark-haired, loose and going down her back. Smiling blue eyes and heart-shaped lips. A convincing facsimile of life, he would concede. The flask in her hand was already open, and her shoddy lute laying further down in the grass.

"Drink?" she offered.

"Most kind of you," he agreed.

She poured the liquor down his throat until he raised his hand, swallowing a cough.

"Gods," Amadeus got out. "Is that the horrid fermented cherry extract from Atalante?"

"It's just the *foulest* thing, isn't it?" she grinned. "It's like it can't decide whether it wants to be sweets or poison."

"And to think they call me a monster," he muttered. "I've never fed such torment to prisoners."

"Another?" Marguerite offered.

"Might as well," Amadeus said. "I'm not looking forward to opening that vein, this ought to take the edge off."

Another spot of torture later his belly and throat had warmed, at the mere price of the taste of a violently misused orchard taking over his palate.

"So, you might be wondering why I'm here," the Bard said.

"I'm rather more curious as to why none of your fellows have awakened," he said. "Their senses should be sharper than that."

"If they were going to wake, I wouldn't be here," Marguerite shrugged.

"Convenient," Amadeus said.

"Eh," she hedged. "I don't need to tell you how tetchy providence can get. Even with loaded dice you have to roll."

"I take it this a visit in your official capacity, then," he said.

"Surprised, are we?" she grinned, revealing slightly crooked teeth.

"It was my theory that you could only work through Named," Amadeus said. "I find it rather horrifying that you are evidently not so restricted."

While the dark-haired main currently believed himself to be without power – and would comport himself as such – it remained only a theory. There were likely no greater expert on namelore alive than the Wandering Bard, insofar as she was that, and so her confirmation or denial would hold some weight. No overmuch, of course, as she was still a hostile entity. But it would be a useful entry to this running mental tally.

"Still fishing, huh?" Marguerite smiled. "That's not Name so much as it is nature, I think. Needing a plan, always a plan, even if you're screaming inside."

"You praise me overmuch," Amadeus said. "You have, after all, defeated –"

"Warlock's dead," the Wandering Bard said.

He paused. She might be lying. To hurt him, to cloud his... Amadeus breathed in, breathed out. It was set aside.

"Blew up a fleet going out, but that's more than a fair trade," Marguerite said. "Empire's a real mess at the moment, since he vaporized the better part of

Thalassina with his last hurrah. Your little friend up high's going spare trying to keep it all together."

"Yet you are here," Amadeus said. "And not there, stoking the fires."

"Catherine got herself killed again," the Bard casually said. "And let me tell you, now *that* was a show. You don't often see that calibre of foolishness slugging it out no holds barred."

His fingers tightened. Breathe in, breathe out. Control. The moment he lost control, the creature would make use of him for whatever purpose she needed. It might be time to consider smashing his head into the ground until he fell unconscious.

"It's fascinating, watching you take that paternal feeling by the throat and just..." Marguerite snapped her fingers, "There goes the neck. Back into the box it goes."

The taunts were immaterial. Useful information could still be had. Amadeus put a tremor to his voice.

"She wouldn't die that easily," he said, making himself look away.

"Glancing away is the part Malicia taught you, isn't it?" the Bard mused. "She's *good*. Must have guessed the eyes would give up the game, it's always the hardest part to master."

The frightful depths of that thing's perception were not to be underestimated, he mentally conceded. She was, after all, entirely right. Cold green eyes flicked back to study her face.

"You're headed for Salia, in case you were wondering," Marguerite said. "They're keeping you in the countryside because Hasenbach knows they have you. She sent half a hundred companies out with orders to take you into custody."

"Did she now?" Amadeus said.

"Second order is to cut off your head the moment they have you," the Bard continued amusedly. "She's not best pleased you're not already decorating a pike. Tariq's going to get an earful."

He'd known there was a reason he liked the woman. She had a good head on her shoulders, to wish the opposite of him.

"I am to be paraded before the crowds, then," he said.

"Nah, they'll get a hero under illusion for that," Marguerite said. "Saint's gonna cut out your soul and have it bound to something, she insisted. They want bait, not to risk a rescue."

Implying that, to the best of the Pilgrim's knowledge, there were still villains in the East he could be considered bait for. He could not know whether or not Eudokia was still with the legions. If she'd judged it feasible he could be reacquired she would have left without a second thought, but in the absence of that Scribe would remain with Grem. Assassin was still in Ashur, presumably, and impossible to contact. That much had been necessary to ensure the Augur could not interfere. That left Catherine – allegedly dead, though that was admittedly not always enough to stop her – and perhaps Masego. *Unless what the*

Bard has told me is false, he thought. *Or what she has shared is true, and the Pilgrim does not know it.*

Too many unknowns for a solid strategic assessment, and no real way to acquire the information he needed through reliable sources. If he had the means, if he could lead a message, *if*. What a bastard word to be curtailed by. Pushing aside the frustration, Amadeus forced himself to consider the conversation through broader perspective. It should not be taking place at all, he thought. He held no Name, commanded no armies and if she had spoken true the Calamities had largely ended as threat. Neither Eudokia nor Assassin could be counted on for independent action, and held highly limited direct martial value besides. His sole remaining worth was as a hostage, and that was not the Wandering Bard's game.

Why, then, was she here?

"There's one part of you that I actually like, did you know?" Marguerite said. "It's also what I hate the most, but it does tend to be that way with villains."

"I make a very good lentil soup," Amadeus suggested.

Behind the pithy words he observed her carefully. Now they entered the field of revelations, the most dangerous part of this dangerous conversation.

"You don't digest defeat," the Bard said. "It doesn't fill your belly, weigh you down. You dissect it, read the entrails like an augury, and then ask yourself – if I could do it again, how would I do it *better*?"

He watched her in silence.

"Even now," she murmured, "behind the eyes there's a few cogs turning. What can I do? How should I do it? And they'll only stop when you die."

"Which," Amadeus said, "looks to be rather soon."

"Nah," the Wandering Bard. "You don't get to be a rallying cry. See, you paid your dues."

His eyes narrowed.

"You're no favourite son, it's true," she mused. "You never played the game the way you're meant to. But you did kill the opposition and tip the scales. They wouldn't cut you loose after that, it's now how they do things."

"I am," Amadeus said, "no longer the Black Knight."

"You don't fit that groove anymore," Marguerite said. "Powerless you ain't, *Maddie*. You know what you are, deep down, you just think it's beneath you."

His fingers tightened under the knuckles were white.

"Claimant," the Wandering Bard said. "You can have your second shot at it, you're owed that. But if you really want it?"

She drank deep, then wiped her mouth.

"Well, there's always a price isn't there?" she shrugged. "So tell me, Amadeus of the Green Stretch. . . "

She smiled, crooked and wide under moonlight.

"What do you think is right?" she asked.

She leaned forward.

"How far are you willing to go, to see it done?"

He closed his eyes. She was gone a moment later when he opened them, without so much as a whisper. He was silent and still, for a very long time.

Mistake, he thought.

Bonus Chapter: Peregrine II

> "Peace is not a right, it is the privilege of those who have toiled to break the back of war."
>
> King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

"You were gone for long, this time," she said.

A few years ago Tariq's pride might have been mildly stung by the fact that she could return to casual conversation so swiftly after an hour of rather delightful exertion in bed, but these days he knew better. His head fell back against the pillow, though he twisted around after to better be able to run a hand down the bare flank of his lover. She bit her lip at the sensation, to his pleasure, to her gazed turned amused when she caught his eyes lingering on the generous curve of her breasts.

"You will not distract me so easily," Sintra Marave warned him. "I have learned of your wiles, Tariq of No Import."

His name she spoke with a teasing lilt, as it had become something of a jest between them. It had become clear rather early on that his attempts at hiding his identity had been seen through near immediately: Sintra, he'd learned, regularly corresponded with his sister. From their first meeting she had suspected him. There were, he supposed, only so many haggard young men named Tariq wandering the countryside of Levant.

"I surrender before your keen insight, then," Tariq grinned.

He did know better, now. Better than to think this was casual conversation at all, or that its initiation so soon after their pleasure-taking was slight to bedplay itself. Sintra would not still leave her balcony door unlocked whenever he returned to Alava was she displeased with their time together.

"So keen that I discern you travelled to the Free Cities," the heiress to the Champion's Blood said.

"Stygia," he freely admitted. "Never before had I seen such a horrifying pit of human misery, and I walked the streets of Levante during the plague."

"Famously," Sintra drily said. "What took you to that nest of slavers?"

She shifted around in their bed – arrogance on his part, to think of it as that, and yet he could not help it – and rested her chin one her palm. While

that did interesting things to the parts of her beneath said chin, Tariq valiantly maintained his concentration.

"There was a delegation headed to Arwad by ship," he said. "One of their slaver ships struck it on the way there – by mistake, I believe, even Stygians are not usually so bold – and took captives before sinking it."

Sintra's brow rose.

"Junla Osena?" she said, surprised. "That was *you*?"

"I followed the trail back to Stygia," Tariq said. "Though I did not know anything of the ship save that it was Levantine when I came across it."

His lover snorted out a laugh, her sweat-soaked and somewhat dishevelled braids swinging as she did.

"Only you," Sintra fondly said, "would end up rescuing the third in line for Tartessos by accident. You do know she's publicly broken her betrothal?"

The healer grimaced, rather embarrassed.

"I had heard," he said, chagrined. "I did not mean to convey interest where there is none."

Sintra chuckled, and for a moment he admired the ripple of the muscle in her arms. No frail poet, his lover. Warrior to the bone, born for the fight. Unlike the Lady Junla.

"Worried I'll get jealous?" she teased.

Tariq sighed.

"Could you not be, at least a little?" he half-complained.

She smiled, but it was brittle.

"You know I cannot wed you," Sintra said. "It would be-"

"- taken as a challenge to Yasa, I know," he softly finished.

The heiress to Alava, trading promises with a man who'd once been proposed heir to the Tattered Throne? Regardless of the truth it would be seen as a war of succession in the making, the Champion's Blood attempting to put a puppet of the Pilgrim's Blood in power. The Dominion would split apart at the seams, lords and ladies taking up steel to place crown their favourite. Their fingers threaded, without him ever needing to think of it, and he glanced down at the sheets. Tariq had not taken another lover since the night she'd first smiled at him and mentioned her balcony wall could easily be scaled. Love was a word they had avoided, though it roared loud in their forced silences.

"You could come with me," he said, not looking up.

Fingers caressed his cheek, surprisingly gentle for the roughness of the skin.

"You know I cannot," Sintra repeated.

"You would not be the first Marave to prize adventure over the high seat," he pointed out, and immediately felt guilty for it.

It was been ill-said, that. To ask her to leave her life, her rights behind her simply to be with him. How easy it was to speak of sacrifice, when you were not the one making it. A comforting hand fell on his shoulder. It was not Sintra's,

or any mortal's. The fingers on his cheek feel and an apology was halfway out his lips when she tucked up his chin, dark eyes meeting his.

"If you were just a man, we'd be hunting chimeras in the Brocelian and sleeping in brambles under moonlight," Sintra solemnly said. "Never believe otherwise. But you are not that, love. I called your rescue in Stygia an accident, but we both know it wasn't that."

Tariq's lips tightened.

"I am a healer," he insisted.

"When the levies broke in Malaga, you held back the sea for near an hour," Sintra gently said. "There are some who still swear you cradled a star in your hands. A healer, perhaps, but also more than that."

A Pilgrim, she did not say. The Grey Pilgrim. No matter the colour of the robes Tariq wore, dust always turned them grey. The whispers had told him that denial would change nothing. He might have hated them, had they not always taken him where he could do so much *good*. It was still bitter brew to swallow that he would have to do it alone. He dropped back onto the pillow, tired in more than body. They remained like that for a long time, the sounds of Alava at night sneaking in through the balcony door they'd been too preoccupied to properly close. He'd come to think of the city more as a home than Levante ever had been. Tariq had been a boy, back in the Old City. It was in Alava he had learned to truly leave that behind. *Let them bury me here, when Above calls me home*, he thought. *In the shade of the pear trees beneath the balcony.* A morbid thought, and he chased it away with softer words shared with Sintra. They half-fell asleep, after, but he woke before long. The whispers were back. East, he thought. They wanted him to head east. He clenched his fist and forced his eyes to close, though sleep did not return.

"They're calling again, aren't they?" Sintra suddenly whispered.

Her voice was still hoarse with sleep. He turned to kiss her brow.

"They can wait," he whispered back.

It had been a long five months without seeing her. The Ophanim could hold their tongues until dawn, at least. Sintra rose, the sheets falling off of her torso, and smiled.

"Go," she said.

"Sintra-" he started.

"Go," she interrupted. "Honour your Blood, Tariq."

He clenched his teeth.

"You will have a bed here, when you return," Sintra said, then caught him by the nape of the neck and brought him into a bruising kiss.

The parted too soon, both panting.

"And you *will* return," Sintra ordered. "That much I claim from you, by right of conquest. If the Choir of Mercy takes issue, let them try the might of the Champion's Blood."

The Ophanim murmured approvingly, to his mild distress.

"Conquest?" he croaked out.

She grinned.

"Do you truly think *you* were the pursuer in this, Tariq of No Import?"

—

Tariq was thirty one years old, when his mother died.

It had been thirteen years since he had last set foot in the city of Levante, and in truth it was unwise for him to return even now. His sister Yasa would not formally ascend to the Tattered Throne until the funerary games of the departed Seljun of Levant were ended, and in a way his presence here could still be taken as a challenge to her rights. He'd been prepared to linger on the outskirts of the region until the games had ended, but Yasa had written – he could almost hear the very mild tone she'd used when they were children and she thought he was being a fool – that she would send the army to drag him into the city tied like a hog if he did not come by himself. *She robbed year from us, brother, with her fecklessness. I will not grant her a single day more.* And so Tariq slipped back into the city where he'd been raised under cover of night, dark cloak covering the grey robes he had grown weary of fighting against. The city guards did not look twice, for the city was swelling fit to burst with those come to pay their last respects, and after passing the walls he let his feet guide him.

How easy it was to return to the old city, as if more than a decade had not passed. This was not home, had not been a in a long time, but it would have been a lie to say there was no fondness to be found. Tariq came across his first silver breastplate ten blocks away from the entrance to the palace, and nodded with approval at the vigilance. It did little to stop him from entering unseen, though. He'd walked paths more dire than this. Salia, where all of Levant were looked upon with suspicion, Mercantis as a wanted man and even Thalassina, where the slightest sign of Bestowal was a mark of death. He brushed his hands against the old wards the Grim Binder had put into place at the behest of her comrade the first Grey Pilgrim, feeling them part for him almost eagerly. There were few places in Levant who were not friend to what he'd inherited from his distant ancestor. He strode into the depths of the palace fleetfoot and unseen, letting chance guide him. It tended to favour him. Surprised flicked across his face when he found himself by his mother's old bureau, candelight and magefire shining under the door. Tariq touched his lips, whispered *open* and touched the lock. Light glimmered over steel, and easy as that it was done.

He entered quietly, finding his only sister sitting at the broad oaken desk and methodically going through correspondence. Half-moon spectacles – of Ashuran make, he noted – rested loosely against her nose as she frowned downwards in thought. Tariq leaned against the doorway for a moment, taking in the sight of Yasa Isbili for the first time in thirteen years. They had traded letters, whenever they could be snuck in, but anything more would have been too risky. Her face had grown thicker, he thought. It suited her well, he thought, made her long braid seems less like some strange tail sprouting from the back of her head. There were lines on her face where there had once been none, but

she seemed... vibrant. Like she'd finally reached where she had always been meant to stand. *You have, Yasa*, he thought. *And they will remember you as the greatest Seljun we've had in centuries.* Smiling, Tariq cleared his throat. She nearly jumped out of her skin, but her eyed widened when she took him in.

"Tariq," she said, almost awed. "How did you- no, it doesn't matter."

She rose to her feet, pushing back her chair, and their strides met halfway. The siblings held each other close for a very long time, content to simply enjoy the luxury so long denied them. Yasa withdrew first, eyes misty. His were as well, and he clutched her forearm tight.

"Honoured Sister," he smiled.

"None of that," she replied, shaking her head. "Not from you, Tariq. Never from you."

"I must," the healer reminded her. "And I will kneel as well, come the games."

"You're the Grey Pilgrim, you idiot," she snorted. "You don't kneel to anyone."

"To you, yes," Tariq firmly maintained. "Until the message sinks in."

She brushed back her braid.

"We can argue about that tomorrow," she said ruefully. "I'm too glad to see you to muster proper indignation."

"And up late, I see," Tariq said. "Preparing still?"

"*That*, at least, is over with," Yasa grimly replied. "Letters from abroad are a relief, truth be told. News about so far away are more diversion than duty."

The healer nodded knowingly.

"The Praesi civil war?" he guessed.

"When are they not?" she shrugged. "The committees in Ashur are betting the rebel calling himself Nefarious will win, though it shouldn't affect trade. They say he has Callowan ambitions."

"When do they not?" Tariq shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips.

Gods, it was still so easy to speak with her. As if they had never parted. The healer had never put as much stock in the Blood as most his people, but perhaps there was some truth to it. There was something running through his sister's veins that was kin to him, and it was more than just red water. They sat, after that, together in that bureau they'd both been forbidden to enter as children. They traded stories of his travels for hers of the city and their family, hours passing by until dawn came. Tariq noted the dark circles around Yasa's eyes with some guilt.

"May I?" he said, offering his hand.

"Yes?" she said, bemused.

The Light wreathed his hand, a small glimmer, and poured into her body. The rings disappeared, chasing away the tiredness, but Tariq's eyes opened wide.

"Brother?" Yasa asked.

A broad grin split his face.

"You're pregnant," he said. "A boy."

She let out a noise of shock at the sudden announcement, before relief and delight claimed her face. After all these years of trying, finally the Heavens had blessed her. Tariq was going to have a nephew and there was not a single thing in Creation that could spoil this day.

—

On the last day of the funerary games, the Grey Pilgrim knelt before his sister in front of every lord and lady in the Dominion of Levant.

When whispers began spread, he stared at them cold-eyed until there was not a damned sound in the room.

—

A fervour swept across the Dominion, after Yasa Isbili sat the Tattered Throne. For the first time since anyone could remember, there was more to the Majilis than bickering and backbiting. The Seljun was still young, the people said, and she had the fire in her belly that had driven the Pilgrim's Blood to first wrest a nation out of the hands of the Principate. After every journey Tariq undertook, he passed through taverns and inns and let the rumours wash over him with a smile. *The levies at Malaga were raised back properly*, the people said. *About time, and every great Blood put coin to it.* To the Brocelian he went, guiding the Lanterns to purge a barrow-curse gone wild. *The old rebel road is being paved anew, from Levante to Vaccei*, the people said. *The Majilis said they'll raise waystations as well.* To Nicae he went, scaring off the Shadow-eater long enough for the Thieftaker to learn his true face. *They're founding a school in Levante*, the people said. *Ashuran scholars will come teach.*

Tariq came and went, and every time he returned his people were thriving a little more. It was as if the savage need for doing better Yasa had felt since they were children had trickled down to every last soul in Levant. Wildlands were being claimed, walls raised around towns and beasts driven away. Fields were tilled, mines dug and for the first time since he could remember he could see pride in the back of those calling themselves Levantines. Not an Ashuran protectorate, not Procer's rebel principalities – it was as if the entire Dominion had woken up from a long slumber, finally remembering the defiant spirit that had seen it become a nation at all.

"I knew," he told Sintra, three years after the coronation. "I always knew that she was born for this."

His lover idly slapped his chest, though from the lack of bite to it she appeared to be amused.

"Are you really going to boast about Yasa being a fine Seljun even while we're in bed?" she complained.

"My apologies, Lady Sintra," Tariq grinned.

Her father had passed the high seat onto her last year, after finding the pain in his joints made it hard to hold his axe. The Ophanim had been merciful enough no whispers had come when they Lord of Alava had held his final feast before putting on his finest arms and armour, mounting his horse and

riding into Brocelian Forest to kill the largest monster in there or die trying. The Lanterns had brought back word months later that he'd been found in the mouth of a mansion-sized manticore, having allowed it to bit him so he could drive his spear through the roof of its mouth. He'd stayed with her through the grief, though even at the worst she'd been fiercely proud of the last honour he had brought to their Blood. The Pilgrim had expected they would part for the last time, after that, but Sintra had instead baldly announced her younger brother as her heir and that she would only ever wed a man who brought her the head of every prince and princess in Procer. And so the balcony door remained unlocked, home remained home.

It was not the life he had seen for himself, as a child, but Tariq found to his surprise that he was happy. Even the Ophanim, whose presence he had once found unsettling, had become trusted and cherished friends. Partners more farsighted than he, helping him see where he needed to go before he knew he needed to be there. He still passed through Levante whenever he could, to see his sister and play with his young nephew. Izil was a riotous little joy, with all his mother's cleverness already showing signs of sharing his father's tall height and broad built. Seven years after her ascension to the Tattered Throne, Yasa Isbili took an arrow through the eye while riding down to harbour to greet Ashuran envoys. She was dead before she touched the ground. The Grey Pilgrim was in Helike, helping a young prince flee his murderous uncle.

Tariq never would manage to forgive himself for that.

—

Izil was dry-eyed, when Tariq elbowed aside the guards to enter his nephew's room. Looking out the window, still as a statue. The long dark locks his mother had so often combed through affectionately were as listless as the boy himself, and those dark Isbili eyes had grown almost dull. The seven year old boy was clutching a toy pilgrim in his hands, the wooden figure's paint worn thin from use. He did not even turn when Tariq entered the room. One of the guards followed inside, grimacing as he spoke.

"Revered Pilgrim, you cannot-"

"Where is his father?" the Grey Pilgrim calmly asked.

The guard winced.

"As he is under suspicion, Honoured Brother Bakri has order confined him to his quarters," he said.

Tariq closed his eyes. Yasa had never worried of their younger brother, for all that his martial exploits had earned him repute. He'd never had a mind for the kind of wrangling the Majilis required, or even the more practical aspects of rule. This could be, he thought, Bakri simply making a mistake in his grief. Or it could be something else. *Honoured Brother* Bakri. As if Yasa's child was not the rightful successor.

"Bakri Isbili is now confined to his quarters until I order otherwise," the Grey Pilgrim mildly said. "My sister's husband is to be freed *immediately*."

Tariq opened his eyes and saw naked fear on the guard's face. Angry, roiling Light had shaped in rings around his wrists, he realized.

"I gave you an order, son," the Grey Pilgrim said. "See to it."

The man slowly bowed.

"Revered Pilgrim," he said. "Your will be done."

Tariq gave him a nod, then closed the door behind him. The Light winked out and he knelt by his nephew's side. The boy did not react.

"Izil," he softly said, laying a hand on the child's shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

His nephew flinched at the contact, but some semblance of awareness returned to his eyes.

"Uncle?" the boy whispered.

"It's me," Tariq whispered, stroking the boy's hair gently. "Come back to us."

His little mouth trembled.

"Uncle," he mumbled. "Mother's gone. She – they. . . "

"It's all right, Izil," he said, holding him close. "I'm here now. I won't let anything happen to you, I swear."

His nephew wept, and when Tariq found who was responsible for this stars would rain until nothing was left but ashes.

No whispers came.